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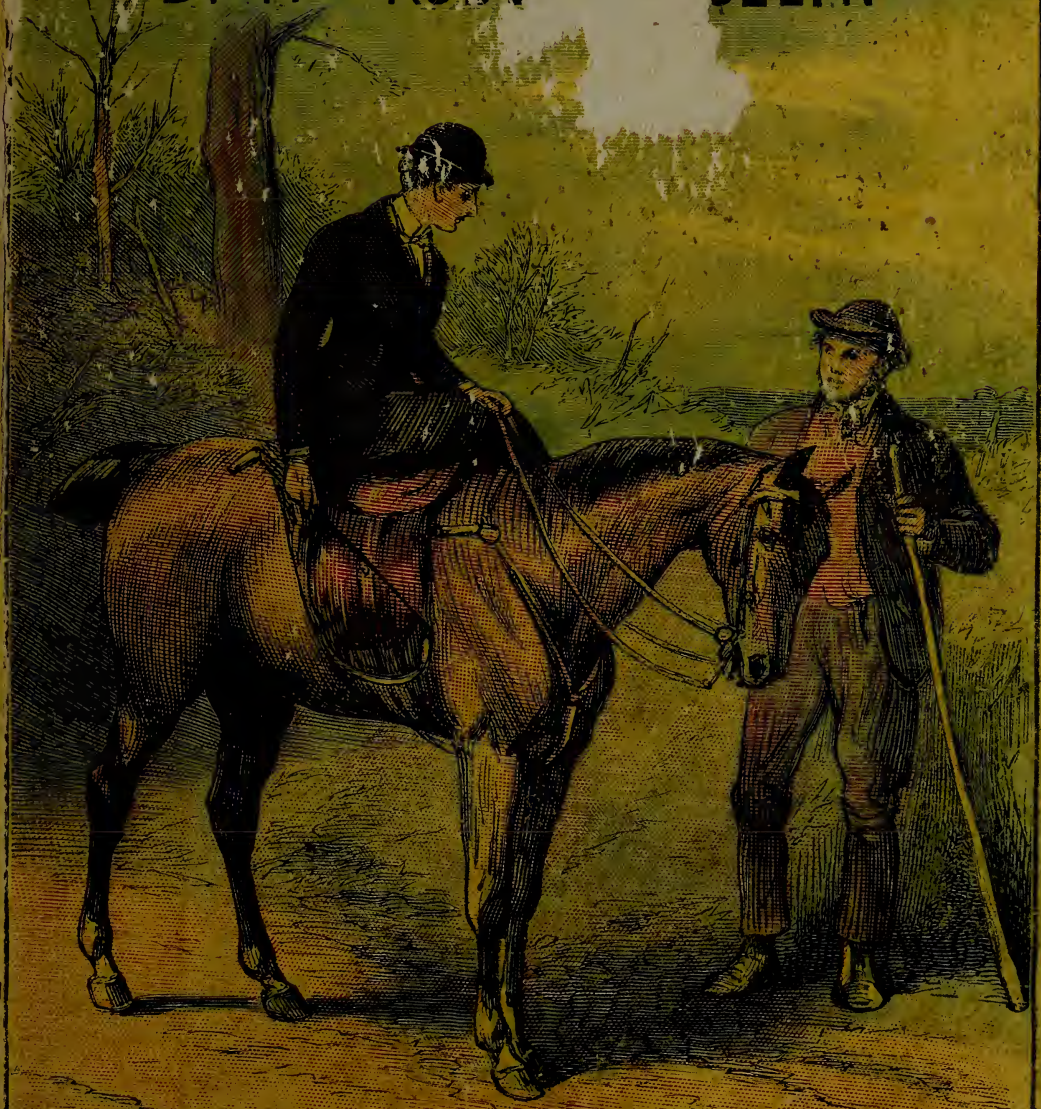

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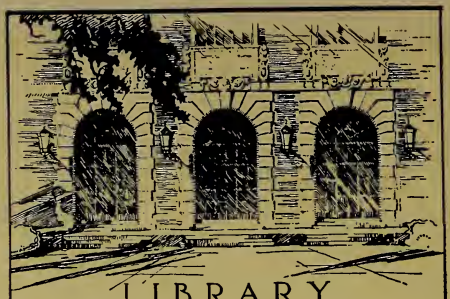

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CHAPTER I.

COUSIN GEORGE.

'All regt an stregt i' mak and shap,
A mould for t' race o' men,
A dahuregh, upregt, beng-up chap,
Nut mitch unlike mesen.'

Natterin' Nan.

'CAN you tell me the way to Westby?'

'Noa.'

'Thank you,' said Miss Vernon, and then rode slowly on. She had not gone many paces, however, before she stopped, and, turning round again, raised her voice and shouted over the hedge top,—'Can you tell me where this road leads to?'

'Ay! Mister Scoatt's farm.'

'You mean to say that this is a private road?'

'Ay,' agreed the yokel, after a pause, during which he gazed perplexedly in her direction as if not fully understanding her question.

'Then if I go straight on past the farm, shall I get into the Westby high road?'

'Noa.'

After again thanking the ploughboy for his valuable information, Miss Vernon turned her horse's head and set off at a trot to retrace her steps.

She had already ridden several miles out of her way,

and she felt sure it would be some little time before she found herself in a country that she knew again.

She was completely out of her beat, and nearly twenty miles from home. Those twenty miles had to be ridden in the face of a drizzling rain on a horse who, at his best, was a very indifferent hack, and it may therefore seem that this is an unpropitious moment in which to introduce Dolly Vernon to you.

And yet the one thing which could not have failed to have struck you was the childishly-happy, well-contented expression upon that fresh young face of hers, as she jogged slowly homewards in the face of that drizzling rain.

You could see it on her lips, in her eyes, in every movement as she rode along. She seemed utterly indifferent to east wind, drizzling rain, and the fact that Topper could hardly be coaxed out of a jog, tripped unpleasantly every few hundred yards, and obligingly rested the whole weight of his head on her hands.

It is said that one great trouble swallows up all lesser ones; and so it is with happiness. One great cause of joy absorbs all other feelings, and makes the sun shine through every adverse cloud which comes across it. Vera —or, more familiarly, Dolly—Vernon was so very happy just then that she forgot to feel either lonely, lost, or cold. The long ride home was nothing to her, and she would not have changed places with anyone in the whole wide world. Every gust of wind that met her, every drop of rain, were but accompaniments to her own happy thoughts; and as to Topper's blunders, why, they but woke her from a dream of bliss to know that it was not a dream.

This girl, who, in spite of adverse circumstances, was so extremely well contented with her lot, was Squire Vernon's second daughter.

She had one sister, several years her senior, and no brothers.

The sister had married about five years before this story commences. She had been a very beautiful young lady; and very charming when well pleased; but un-

fortunately life at Wyndeane, in the very heart of the hunting country in Mudshire, had never pleased Miss Vernon, and she had pined and drooped and lamented her fate there until she had nearly worried the Squire to distraction; and so he had not very deeply lamented the day she married young Frederick Areley, a man of good family, the owner of a fine property in the south of England, and an income of over forty thousand a-year.

That marriage had not turned out quite as well as it might have done. Mr Frederick Areley was not a very satisfactory husband, and perhaps he had not a wholly satisfactory wife.

But if at Areley Court there was sometimes war, at Wyndeane there reigned a perfect state of peace. No two people ever more thoroughly understood each other than the Squire and his second daughter. Dolly, with her sunny face and winning ways, had wormed her way into the very warmest place in her father's heart, and to say that he worshipped the very ground she trod upon is by no means going too far.

At seventeen Dolly Vernon had succeeded in worming her way into the hearts of most of the Muddletonites. There was not a man who hunted with the Muddleton who was not pleased to see her out with them; and as to women, they adored her; which, considering her pretty face, may be said to guarantee that Miss Dolly Vernon was a really nice, lovable girl, and that she had a disposition and manner little short of being angelic.

We must now follow her on her homeward ride.

After she had ridden a mile or two, a voice in the distance woke her from her dreams more effectually than any of 'Topper's' numerous trips had previously succeeded in doing.

'Why, Dolly, where are you going to?' it said, in a tone of great surprise and still greater satisfaction.

'I am by no means sure!' was the laughingly-given reply. 'One thing is certain, though, I have very recently been going in the wrong direction.'

She turned her horse into the high road as she spoke, and in so doing came face to face with her cousin.

'Lost, Dolly? Why, I thought you knew every yard of our country, and could have found your way about it blindfold!'

'To tell you the truth,' she replied naïvely, 'I had that same opinion until an hour ago. Where are we?'

'About eighteen miles from home,' he replied. 'And a wretched afternoon it is too!'

'Well, never mind the weather,' she returned lightly. 'We English people ought to be indifferent to it if we wish to live fairly happy lives. There is one comfort, we have met each other; let us be thankful for it.'

'I am extremely thankful for it, I assure you,' was the quiet answer. 'Far more so than you can possibly be.'

'Impossible, my dear boy!' was the decided reply. 'I really was never half so pleased to see you before! I was lost; quite lost!'

'And I was in the very lowest of spirits over the prospect of my long solitary ride.'

'Oh, I should not have minded the ride,' she replied rather absently. 'My spirits were not suffering; only, you see, I did not know my way.'

'But still it will be cheerier if we ride together; won't it, Dolly?' he asked wistfully.

His question seemed to rouse her out of a reverie. With a sudden smile she turned her grey eyes towards him, and glanced up into his face from under her long, dark, curling lashes. 'Much cheerier, of course, George!' she replied warmly. 'I am very glad indeed that we came across each other in such a lucky manner.'

George simply coloured with pleasure; it never even crossed his mind, that had she loved him ever so little even, such a frank avowal as this would never have passed her lips. In his happiness, he felt just a little awkward. 'Are you any the worse for your fall?' he inquired, by way of changing the subject.

'Not a bit,' she replied laughingly; 'but do look at my habit!'

'Never mind the habit,' returned her cousin stolidly. 'It is a mercy you are all right.'

'That is all very well, my dear boy,' she replied rather

brusquely, 'but one is obliged to think of one's habit now-a-days, I can assure you. You can have no idea how often one has to go to Busvine or Hölne before one can get a tidy new one.'

'I wish you would think of that fact, Dolly, before trying to do impossible things. If you would, I, for one, should owe a deep debt of gratitude to Messrs Busvine & Co.,' returned George quietly.

'Any outsider, listening to your conversation, would certainly glean from it that I was one of those reckless young women who, blessed with more pluck than discretion, are such a decided nuisance in the hunting field,' was the dry reply.

'My dear Dolly, you must excuse my saying that you are talking nonsense. You do not want me to tell you you can ride, or to flatter you by saying that any outsider, unless he was a very ignorant outsider indeed, would have known that fact long before he had had the pleasure of seeing you; but all that is apart from the question.'

'The question of my trying to do impossible things?' inquired Dolly, laughing as she spoke.

'Yes,' was the seriously-given reply. 'You knew old Topper could not jump that Picley drain; no horse could jump it from the Granton side at the part where the hounds crossed it to-day. You knew that as well as anyone, Dolly. Why did you try to do it?'

Again Dolly laughed. 'Do you suppose I did it because I love to be immersed nearly up to the neck in muddy water?' she inquired jestingly. 'If you do, you are wrong. I managed it very badly, I grant; but then I did get Topper out fairly cleverly, did I not? and I believe I gave him the satisfaction of knowing that only one other horse except himself was in the run at all after that.'

'You extricated yourself out of a difficult position admirably, as usual, Dolly,' returned George. 'Only, why did you place yourself in it, knowing you must have a fall?'

'Ask Captain Dasher why he did so, George. His answer will do for us both'

'Oh, Dasher!' exclaimed George, rather impatiently.

'Your dearest friend,' put in Dolly, with a smile.

'Dasher is a man.'

'Is he?' laughed Dolly. 'My dear George, you surprise me. I really had no idea of it!'

George, evidently against his will, gave a half-amused laugh. He was very much in earnest, but the expression upon Dolly's face was too much for him.

'And a lady ought not to ride for a fall,' he protested.

'And yet I have ridden for several falls in my time, George, and have not broken any bones yet; whereas Captain Dasher smashes about two a season.'

'You never think what it would be to the Squire and me if you ever have a really nasty accident, Dolly, do you?'

Dolly shook her head. 'No, I do not,' she replied decisively. 'I never think of unpleasant things unless I am obliged to do so. You are certainly in a most cheerful humour to-day. I congratulate you upon it; but if it continues much longer, I shall wish we had never met. Pray do not fuss about me any more. Nought never comes to any harm, they say; and that is a most consoling thought for you.'

'Nought?' repeated young Lord Ventnor, turning his blue eyes wistfully upon her. 'Nought, Dolly?'

'Yes, nought; less than nought,' she replied lightly. 'And now, like a sensible boy, do try and put aside this dreary humour. The state of the weather is quite bad enough without your trying to make matters worse than they already are. Do you want to make me regret that I met you?'

George certainly did not wish to do that, and so, like a wise young man, he turned the subject when next he spoke.

Dolly and he had been dearest friends since childhood. She had never felt the absence of a brother, because she had ever had one in him; and, as to him, from the day he first went over to Wyndeane to be introduced to the 'new cousin' there, and that same new cousin had clutched his dark hair in her chubby little hand, and pulled it ruth-

lessly, he had been little better than her slave. He had been a schoolboy in those days, and she a baby. Now he was a man, and she was no longer a child; and all the difference the intervening years had brought was this, —he was still in her eyes a brother, but in his she was a saint, an angel, what you will, so long as it is not a sister.

Only Dolly had no suspicion of this; none at all. That was a cause of much thankfulness on his part. That she would perhaps marry him some day in a far-off future was the ideal dream of his life; but his great love for her, and his natural humility, made this but a shadowy dream altogether too good to be probable; almost too good to be even within the limits of possibility.

He could see nothing in himself to merit so much happiness. He was really a good-hearted young fellow; he had no touch of self-conceit in his composition; and he knew quite well that the fact that he was a rich man, and the sixteenth Earl of Ventnor, would not weigh an ounce in the balance of the fors and againsts of his chance with his cousin Dolly Vernon. But what he did not suspect was the possibility that there might be some other man in the question. He was a very perfect young man, as young men go, but had such a horrible possibility as this presented itself to him, it would certainly have been as wholly distasteful to him as it would have been to any other less perfect man.

George, sixteenth Earl of Ventnor, was as honest and as straightforward a young fellow as he well could be. He was not handsome—far from it; but there was something so pleasant about his face, and such a kind-hearted, genial, frank expression in his eyes, that one never noticed that the owner of them was undeniably plain. His mouth, which was his best feature, told of a strong, firm character under its dark moustache, and, when he smiled, he displayed a set of perfect white teeth which would have caused many a beauty to break the tenth commandment.

For a young man he had a really wonderfully courteous and polished manner; without having the slightest touch of priggishness about him, he always seemed to have the

power to say the right thing just at the right moment. Added to this, he had the happy knack of never forgetting either the face or name of any fellow-creature he had ever seen before, and whether it had been the day before yesterday or the year before last that he had previously met that person, he was certain to remember all his pet hobbies, and to be delighted to see him again.

That, under all these circumstances, he was a very popular young man goes without saying; friends, tenants, servants, they all were enthusiastic in his praise; and as to Squire Vernon, he was the most enthusiastic of them all —he looked upon him already in the light of a son, and the dearest wish of his life was that he might some day be his son-in-law.

Not that the Squire would have said one word upon the subject to Dolly—she must choose her future husband of her own free will, and no word of his should ever influence her either one way or the other; only, seeing George's devotion, the Squire saw no possible reason why it should not be returned. She liked him so sincerely; and were there so very many steps between sincere liking and sincere love?

So many that Dolly, having sincerely liked her cousin since her babyhood, looked upon him no more in the light of being a lover than if he had in truth been her brother; and, quite unaware of the tumult which was raging in his honest breast, she rode along beside him, chattering gaily as she went along.

By-and-by her flow of chatter ceased, and she lapsed into a long silence—a silence which at last her cousin broke.

'A penny for your thoughts, Dolly!' he remarked quietly, after having watched the smile which those same thoughts had brought upon her lips for a long time surreptitiously in silence.

A soft blush sprang up into her cheeks.

'They would not interest you, George,' she replied quietly.

For several seconds George studied her face in silence. Why had she blushed like that? Never in his life had

he seen her blush before, and he knew full well that that blush in no way belonged to him.

'I want you to come and dine with us to-night, George,' said Dolly, presently. 'We heard yesterday from Jack Denham, and he is coming to us to-day.'

'I shall be delighted,' returned George. 'To tell you the truth, I was hoping you would take pity upon me this evening. The little mother is away, and, as you know, I have no liking for my own company. So Jack Denham is coming to Wyndeane to-day, is he? I am glad of that. I like Jack Denham very much; don't you, Dolly?'

'Yes,' was the very quiet reply. 'I like him very much.'

'You do?' persisted George questioningly, as if he half doubted her words.

'Certainly I do! Why do you ask?' was the reply, given more quietly than ever.

'I wondered whether you did like him or not, Dolly,' said George, thoughtfully. 'I should hardly have thought you would have liked him much.'

'And why, pray?' she inquired rather curtly.

'Oh, I can hardly say,' murmured George, half apologetically. 'Of course he is a very good fellow in some ways, and extremely amusing, and all that; but there is something I cannot quite understand—'

'And, of course, if you cannot understand it, it must be bad indeed,' put in Miss Vernon, drily.

'Are you not being a little hard upon me, Dolly?' was the quiet reply.

'Why should you abuse Jack Denham, then, George?' she asked petulantly.

'I am not abusing him. I have no wish to do so, for personally I like him very much.'

'But does he not appear to you to be rather exceptionally nice?' suggested Dolly, quickly. 'Yes he does, and so he is.'

George glanced at her in a surprised, troubled manner. In some ways he was a rather dense young man, but it struck him that Dolly was considerably out of temper; more so than such a trivial matter seemed in any way to

necessitate. 'What is the matter, Dolly?' he asked uneasily.

'I dislike hearing you say unkind things of people behind their backs; you ought to have known I should dislike it,' she replied, in a rather cold tone of voice.

'But, my dear girl, I really said nothing—'

'That is the worst of it! You really had absolutely nothing to say against him.'

'Well, Dolly, if it comes to that, I cannot say I think he behaved very well to Miss Erstone.'

Dolly laughed. It was not a very happy laugh; but it was full of satire.

'Well, do not be so angry with me about it,' he pleaded gently.

'Horrid girl!'

'But she was very much in earnest, and Jack Denham knew it,' put in George, firmly.

'You really could hardly expect him to—marry Miss Erstone, could you?' was the cutting rejoinder. 'Even if he did happen to know that the young lady would not object to such an arrangement?'

'I think he flirted abominably with her,' was the quiet answer.

'You are such a boy, George!' returned Miss Vernon, witheringly. 'He only acted as nine men out of ten would have done.'

'Then boy or not, I flatter myself I am the tenth,' said George, with great composure.

For a few seconds Dolly said nothing. Her face had become very grave, and her manner thoughtful. 'Yes, George,' she agreed at last. 'You are the tenth. I grant that.'

'Thank you for that, Dolly!' he returned softly; and, had she chanced to be looking his way, she might have read something strange in the expression of his eyes.

But she did not look his way; her large eyes were fixed straight ahead of her over Topper's ears, and her thoughts had wandered back into dreamland.

CHAPTER II.

SQUIRE VERNON.

'We have scores of good fellows hang out in the shire,
But the best of them all is the galloping squire.'
WHYTE MELVILLE.

A BRIGHTLY-BLAZING fire lit up the old hall at Wyndeane. The rain battered against the stained-glass windows at every gust of wind, but that was the only sign by which the man who sat in a large easy-chair, with his feet upon the fender, could tell that it was a bleak, cheerless day in November. Inside that quaint old hall everything was warm and bright—the light of that huge log fire; the crimson velvet cushions, which made those dark oak chairs look so inviting; the hothouse flowers, so tastefully and profusely arranged in every available corner; the sleepy collie on the hearth; the favourite greyhound curled up in one of the most comfortable arm-chairs—they all seemed to set at complete defiance the damp chilly atmosphere without.

The walls were ornamented with hunting trophies of every description. Over the mantelshelf hung a large picture surrounded by foxes' heads and brushes. The picture was a portrait of Vera's mother, and the remembrances of the hunting-field which surrounded it bore little plates telling of some famous Mudshire runs: runs in which the owner of Wyndeane had shown himself well to the front, in that quiet, masterly way which Bob Vernon always displayed when the fences were biggest, and the hounds running straight. Dolly not only adored her father, she was very proud of him as well; and these, as well as all his other sporting trophies, were amongst her dearest treasures. It was Dolly who arranged them round her mother's picture, explaining as she did so, that she 'would like to have them there.'

Why did I call the middle-aged, grey-headed man, whose face was lined by a life that had battled with all weathers, all climates, and many troubles, for the last

five-and-fifty years, 'Bob' Vernon? The people within twenty miles of Wyndeane called him The Squire: Society knew him as Colonel Vernon; and Dolly always spoke of him as Dads. It was eighteen years since he was handsome, penniless Bob Vernon in the Border Guards; eighteen years since he began to lose the nickname of 'Pretty Bob'—a nickname which he assuredly had never merited; although he had been handsome, as many penniless young Guardsmen are wont to be, and he still was handsome as he sat in his pink coat by his comfortable fire, no longer penniless and no longer young. There had never been any sign of prettiness or dandyism about the Squire, and perhaps that was why his brother officers had nicknamed him Pretty Bob.

He had been extremely popular in his regiment, and a universal favourite, although he had been penniless beyond the pennilessness of most young Guardsmen.

His father had put him into a crack regiment and had then died, leaving him very little, except his blessing. He had had a hard struggle with poverty and against debt, but he had kept out of the latter, and, in spite of the former, his laugh had ever been the heartiest, as well as his face the handsomest, of any round the mess table of the Border Guards.

Robert Vernon in those days could only with difficulty muster three hunters of his own, but, luckily for him, in spite of this, he had never known what it was to miss a day's hunting for lack of a horse to ride; partly, it is true, because he improved young horses, did not mind what sort of animal he rode, and let it be the biggest brute that ever was shod, it was certain to be 'somewhere handy' if Bob Vernon was on its back.

And in this way he had succeeded in defying circumstances, and in living a very fairly pleasant life during his early years in Her Majesty's service. He had been devoted to his profession and to his regiment, and so things had gone on, happily enough, until young Jack Coningham joined the Border Guards; from that day the whole course of Robert Vernon's life underwent a change. He took a strong liking to the young man the first day they

met, and very soon these two became fast friends. Then it so happened that Bob Vernon found himself in a position which enabled him to save young Lord Coningham's life—not, however, without considerably endangering his own. Naturally after this, when he went to stay at Coningham Park, he was made a hero of there; and although he had innate within him an Englishman's strong dislike to hearing his good deeds mentioned, still he could not wholly object to the manner in which young Jack Coningham's mother and sisters showed their gratitude.

To a man who had had many acquaintances, but few real friends, and fewer relations,—a man who had lived a somewhat rough-and-ready kind of life, and who had not known what the words 'Home' and 'Sympathy' meant,—Jack Coningham's home, and the women who inhabited it, were alike novel and charming experiences.

Lady Ventnor loved her son, as a mother and a mother only can love a favourite child; and her gratitude towards the man who had saved her darling's life knew no bounds. Nor was the old Earl behindhand in his gratitude; although he said less about it than his women folk.

Not only was Lord Ventnor very deeply indebted to Bob Vernon, but he very soon began to like him extremely as a man; and he urged and persuaded him to come to Coningham Park whenever it was in his power to do so.

As time went on, Bob found that it was possible to spend a good deal of his time at Coningham. He simply could not keep away from the place; although he fully realised that in going there he only fell deeper and deeper into a trouble out of which he saw no exit.

He was desperately in love with Lord Ventnor's youngest daughter.

Lady Nina Coningham was not strikingly beautiful, but she had the neatest figure, the most lovely dark grey eyes, and the most bewitching manners that Bob had ever seen, and he loved her from the very first moment he saw her, as women are not always loved.

But all this caused him much trouble and pain. He

knew that even should Nina herself be willing to change her present luxurious life for such a one as he could offer her, he could not hope to gain Lord Ventnor's sanction to their marriage. And then, loving the girl better than he loved himself, he did not wish to ask her to share his property with him.

In this Bob Vernon was wrong, as many a good man has been before him. Nina loved him, loved him as women love but once in a lifetime; and her only chance of happiness lay in becoming his wife. She was a good woman too, one who could take the downs as well as the ups of life, if need be.

Had she been some poor man's daughter, Captain Vernon would never have thought twice about the matter, and would straightway have asked her to be his wife; but since she was Lord Ventnor's daughter, that quite altered the case, and to dream of doing such a thing was only to dream of an impossibility, and here again was he mistaken. There are many good women who would infinitely prefer an active, useful life to an idle, luxurious one; who would be quite satisfied and happy if they knew that they were practically of importance to some fellow-creature, but who are far from satisfied by a round of gaiety, which they merely court for want of something better to do.

Lady Nina Coningham was one of these women; and Robert Vernon, when he reasoned to himself that he could not keep a large establishment of servants to wait upon her hand and foot, or a house in Mayfair, little knew how thankful she would be to be able to do things for herself and others, and how she had wearied, as most of us do weary of the obtainable, of the incessant turmoil of the London season, the for ever being socially in evidence; and in fact, of all those frivolities which, to most women who have not participated of them, and many who have, constitute the nearest approach possible to a second heaven on earth.

What do women go to Lords', Hurlingham, St Stephen's, Goodwood, Ascot, Sandown, crushes, theatres, Cowes, and Homburg for? To meet other people!

And how much of the society of any one individual member among your numerous acquaintances can you endure, before you become unbearably bored with that individual? Of course, by incessant change — five minutes to one, ten to another—you escape boredom, but to some people—people who look below the surface of things, by this incessant change you only bore yourself, so as to avoid being bored by others.

Lady Nina had, at three-and-twenty, begun to look beneath the surface; and she was most perfectly prepared to forego the pleasure of being bored by many people, and to try the experiment of how long it would take her before she became bored with Captain Robert Vernon.

She, seeing how matters stood, cleared away all obstacles; let Captain Vernon understand her sentiments upon the subject, won her father's consent by sheer determination, and finally married the only man she had ever loved.

That experiment turned out a success. Bob Vernon never got bored with Nina, and she never got bored with him. What with his pay and her allowance, for several years the two lived very happily together; and those years were undeniably the happiest in either of their lives. Then, by the most unexpected death of a young cousin, Bob suddenly found himself the owner of Wyndeane in Mudshire, and an income which, if not enormous, was certainly quite sufficient to supply every requirement that either he or his wife would ever be in the least likely to have. He was no longer a penniless guardsman; he was a rich man.

It was on just such an evening as the one on which he now found himself, sitting alone, looking somewhat sadly into the past, that Colonel Vernon brought his young wife to the quaint old house which was henceforth to be her home. She had thrown herself into the very chair in which he now sat, had said something about the happy life they would lead together there, had laughingly remarked that she had caught a chill on her journey, and felt a cold coming on, and had died before another month

had passed, leaving a little daughter of five years old and Dolly as a keepsake.

People wondered greatly that Squire Vernon could go on living at Wyndeane after that; and they also wondered at his extreme love for his youngest daughter. These good people did not understand Bob Vernon—nor did he take the trouble to enlighten them. He had loved his wife excessively, and, short as had been the time which she had spent at Wyndeane, the place was associated with her memory as no other place had been; and he would no more have left the house where she had died, and near where she lay sleeping her long, last earthly sleep, than he would have refused to love and cherish the little child who was hers, and whom she would have loved so truly had she lived to do so.

To say that Squire Vernon was a spiritualist would be going beyond the mark, because he had never given a thought to the matter; but it is very certain that he believed in the constant presence of the spirit of his wife at every turn and in every crisis of the long life he lived after her death.

Squire Vernon was a good man. By that I do not mean that he went to church more often than his fellows, or that he gave away tracts; nor do I mean that he never made a false move, and knew nothing of the iniquities which beset mankind. He was not a saint; he was a man, an honest, straightforward man, who would have given away his last sixpence to a friend in need, and who practised a religion which he did not preach.

Example is said to be better than precept (although sometimes a bad example, like an ill wind, provided it is bad enough to be noticeably bad, does its work, showing, as it does, the full disadvantages of a fault), and the example Squire Vernon set was an extremely good one. It influenced every one, more or less, who knew him; and, most of all, it influenced his youngest daughter.

Dolly grew up to be a true and a good woman. Honest, truthful, lovable, unselfish, and so firmly convinced of the all-powerful goodness of her God and Maker that, come what would, nothing in her after life

could ever bring a trouble or a difficulty which that conviction would not clear away.

The Squire, sitting in his chair by the fire, his muddy boots steaming before its warmth, gradually allowed his thoughts to stray away from the past, and to wander back to the present.

'I hope George will find her,' he meditated, 'and that she will not have to come home alone.'

His own horse had been lamed earlier in the day, and, having no second horse out, he had been obliged to come home some time before they found the fox, which gave them one of the very best runs they had that season. He had been obliged to walk every yard of the way home; and thus it was that, at a late hour in the afternoon, he sat by the hall fire, still in his hunting gear.

Since that past, into which he had been looking, many changes had taken place. His brother-in-law, young Jack Coningham, had died before his father, and at old Lord Ventnor's death, some ten years later on, the title and estates had gone to a brother's son,—the young man who, at that moment, was riding homewards with the Squire's daughter.

Young Lord Ventnor preferred Ventnor Castle to Coningham Park for many reasons—one being that, as a child, he had lived there, his father having rented the place from his brother; and, for another, it was very near Wyndeane, and at the time when George ceased to rent Ventnor Castle and became its owner, he had such a great liking for the society Wyndeane gave him, that he never even contemplated making his headquarters any farther away from it than was necessary.

His mother lived there with him—well contented at being allowed to remain in peace at the place where all the best part of her life had been spent.

Mrs Coningham, of course, saw her son's devotion to Dolly Vernon; but Mrs Coningham loved Dolly, with her bright manners and kind, thoughtful little ways, and she saw no possible reason why Dolly should not become her daughter-in-law. That the girl did not return the

love George bestowed upon her no more crossed Mrs Coningham's mind than it crossed the Squire's.

He was a fine, manly young fellow, one whom any girl might be proud to marry, and might be excused for falling in love with; and that Dolly, with her winning ways and soft grey eyes,—which seemed to rest so lovingly on all around her,—should not wish to marry the cousin she had so openly and dearly loved since childhood, seemed to them not only highly improbable, but almost impossible.

The hall door opened suddenly, and a tall, slight figure, in a very mud-be-spattered habit, came quickly in.

'Why, Dads, haven't you changed your things yet?' exclaimed Dolly, as she crossed over to his side.

'No, I have not, Miss Tyrant. But my example is not to be followed. You look half-drowned, and you must get on some dry clothes before you say another word,' replied her father, smiling up at the fair young face above him.

Seen in the lamplight, all damp with rain, and scarlet-cheeked from exercise, that young face was a very attractive one; and even a little stream of black dye, that ran from her hat down to the very tip of an extremely piquant little nose, did not greatly detract from its undeniable beauty.

'That is all very well, dear; but what about your rheumatism? Come, Dads, I do not stir one inch until you show me the way,' she returned, with evident determination, and as she spoke she passed one of her hands under the Squire's arm, and walked off with him towards the stairs. 'Such a run, Dads! Without a check, from Oxton to the gorse just below the Marlby Hills! Topper is a jewel; he—' and then her voice died away in the distance. The sheep dog, which had followed its young mistress to the foot of the dark oak staircase, bestowed one wistful glance after her departing figure, and then leisurely returned to the hearth-rug, where, after turning round three or four times, he settled down to his apparent satisfaction; and silence once again reigned supreme in the old hall at Wyndeane.

CHAPTER III.

'HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN?'

'Faint winds whisper as they pass,
Come away!'—MRS HEMANS.

'FOND as I am of hunting, I really believe that this is the best part of it,' said Dolly to her father, an hour or so later on. She was sitting in a low basket chair, with a blazing fire on one side of her, and a tea-table on the other. The Squire had just entered the room, and was in the act of drawing up his own especial arm-chair close to the fire on the other side of the tea-table.

'Not a bad part of it, Dolly. Especially when you can look back on a good run in which you have had a good place. Topper carried you well, you say; so I conclude you did have a good place?'

'We were satisfied with it, and that is the chief thing,' replied Miss Dolly complacently, as she nestled back amongst the soft cushions of her chair.

She made a truly charming picture as she sat there, with the ruddy glow of the firelight and the more subdued light of the shaded lamps falling lightly upon her pretty figure in its soft white silk tea-gown, and her still prettier face, beneath its cornet of silky auburn coils.

Naturally her beauty appeared to far greater advantage now than when it had been framed in a hard black hat and stiff coat and waistcoat—excellent as both these articles had been, and well as she had worn them.

The Squire glanced up at her and smiled. In his eyes, at any rate, no sight could have been more bewitching than the one before him; and it struck him, as he studied it for a few seconds in silence, that it had never looked more bewitching than it was looking just then. There was a touch of pink in her cheeks, a light in her eyes, and a smile on her lips which seemed unusual there.

'Where did George overtake you?' he inquired suddenly.

Dolly started.

'Just as I turned into the Westby high road,' she replied quietly; 'and very glad I was to see him.'

'It would have been a long lonely ride for you,' murmured the Squire.

'Yes,' assented his daughter pensively.

'And he is such a charming fellow,' continued her father, glancing at her over his teacup as he spoke.

'Indeed he is,' she replied, with a warmth that pleased the Squire far more than it need have done.

'I do not know a better fellow living,' he returned, enthusiastically.

'Nor do I, Dads,' replied Dolly, honestly.

And then again there was a short silence, which was broken by the ringing of a bell and the barking of the dogs.

The Squire rose hastily, and hurried out of the room.

For a few seconds Dolly sat quite still, her eyes fixed upon the fire, and every atom of colour dying out of her cheeks; and then, suddenly, she leant forward, and buried her face in her slender little hands.

It was quite a year since she had seen the man whose voice could be heard in the distance talking to the Squire.

She had been almost a child when she had seen him last; and yet, without rhyme or reason, she loved him—against her will, against her better judgment—loved him with the passionate, absorbing, all-masterful love of youth.

Long before the door opened, she was standing quite quietly by the fire — her face expressionless, and her manner almost suspiciously calm.

Her heart had nearly ceased to beat, and it was only by exercising an extremely strong will, that she could prevent herself from trembling. But little could Captain Denham suspect all that when he entered the room, for the young lady who advanced to meet him did so with a certain quiet dignity in her manner that seemed, charming as it was, to belong to a far older woman.

Her eyes met his with a direct, quiet frankness, that in its very calmness rather disconcerted him, and she

laid her hand in his with a warmth that was neither over nor underdone.

'So very glad to see you, Jack,' she said graciously. 'It seems such an age since you were last here! I hope your horses are all sound, and that you have come prepared to cut us down, as usual?'

Captain Denham was so surprised that at first he forgot to answer her; forgot, with a lack of manners quite unusual in him, to do anything but look down questioningly into her face, and wonder whether this young lady who stood before him was really Squire Vernon's little daughter, or some other quite different woman.

She had been a very pretty child when last they two had met—a pretty child, and a charming one. So pretty and so charming that he had spent a good deal of his spare time in her society when he had been at Wyndeane a year ago, and he had sometimes thought of her since, and wondered whether she would be prettier or plainer when next they met. And now, was this really the same Dolly Vernon at all?

For a moment let us look at this Captain Denham.

An undeniably handsome man. A tall, soldierly figure; a generally trim and smart appearance; a handsome face and a pair of exceptionally good dark blue eyes. Captain John Denham was a first-rate soldier, a capital companion, an extremely good man across country, very popular in his regiment, a man both men and women liked, and who would do any living creature a good turn, if by so doing he did not suffer much personal inconvenience,—and about as great a flirt as ever entered Her Majesty's service.

'You must be cold,' continued Dolly affably; 'so, before we exchange any further civilities, sit down there and let me give you some tea.'

And, in the quick, graceful way which characterised all her movements, she crossed the room, pointed to a chair near the fire, and proceeded to pour out Captain's Denham's tea.

'Why, Dolly, is it really you?' he inquired, not following her instructions as to sitting down, but taking

up his position, man-like, on the hearth, and looking down at her from his superior height.

'Oh, yes,' she replied, with a smile, glancing upwards as she spoke. 'Only I have "grown up" since then, you see,' she added, rather briskly, for his glance had brought a shade of pink into her cheeks, and she was annoyed by the consciousness that it was there.

'No mistake about that,' he returned pensively.

'Sugar, Jack?' she inquired sharply. 'Oh, yes, I remember, you have two lumps.' And then, having put them into his cup, she turned and handed it to him.

Again their eyes met.

'Dolly,' he whispered, in a supplicating manner.

'Yes, Jack?' she replied briskly, holding a plate, with a muffin on it, in mid-air as she spoke.

Captain Denham took a piece of muffin, thanked her for it, and then turned and glanced into the fire in a disconcerted manner.

Then the Squire came in, and there was a cosy conversation about old times, and many questions asked and answered.

The news in the day's papers, the sport the Muddleton had been having, and little scraps of gossip were also discussed; but all the while Captain John Denham was puzzling over in his mind how it was that one short year had made such a great difference in the Squire's daughter.

A year ago they had been admirable friends: perhaps, now that he came to think it over, they had been a little more than friends. Perhaps he had been able to call forth a blush, or some little word, which had told him that Dolly liked him a little better than she liked any of her other friends. Perhaps it had pleased him to note that blush or listen to that unintentional word; perhaps, although he had made light of it at the time, he had valued her friendship, as he called it, more than he himself had ever suspected.

Be that as it might, now that he fancied that he had lost it, it disconcerted and troubled him considerably. So much so, indeed, that by-and-by the Squire began to

find that the conversation was growing more and more one-sided, and that his own interest in it was flagging as a natural consequence.

Murmuring something about letters to write, he presently got up, and, after inquiring if Denham cared to smoke, left the room.

Captain Denham did not care to smoke; and so found himself alone with Dolly.

He was thinking to himself how he should solve the question of whether she was really quite so thoroughly grown-up as she wished him to understand, when Dolly dashed brilliantly off into a spirited flow of small talk, and it was quite a long time before he could get in a single word.

'Dolly,' he began nervously, when she at last paused a few seconds for breath, 'do you remember our ride home from Demberton the day before I left?'

For just a second she made no reply, and the colour flickered suddenly into her cheeks.

'Yes, of course I do!' she exclaimed brightly. 'What a good run we had had that day, and what a tumble Restless gave me over Farmer Grant's new post and rails!'

'I was never so frightened in my life, I know,' returned Captain Denham, in a low, earnest voice, gazing as he did so at his highly-polished patent-leather boots.

Dolly for a moment or two looked steadily into the fire, a blush upon her cheeks, and her lips half parted in a curious little smile. Then quite suddenly she looked up at him, and their eyes met.

She had no idea how bewitchingly charming she was looking just then, or how greatly she was tempting a rather weak man to forget everything except the passing hour; all she knew was this, that there was an expression upon Jack Denham's face, and a light in his eyes, which told her more plainly than any words could have done that he loved her.

And he did love her. Not in the careless, *pour passer le temps* fashion in which he had so often loved before, but with a love that surprised the giver of it by its very intensity.

Whether it had been smouldering within him in the past, or was born on the impulse of the moment, he could not tell; but he loved her—loved her as in all his life he had never loved before.

Just then the sudden knowledge that he did so put every other thought out of Captain Denham's mind.

Again he glanced up at her, and this time his eyes rested upon her face, for Dolly was not looking at him—she had resumed her contemplation of the fire.

'Have you forgotten that we are old friends, Dolly?' he inquired slowly, after a long pause.

'Oh, no!' she replied quietly; but her glance remained fixed upon the burning embers.

'Do you never forget anything?' he continued softly, leaning forward as he spoke, and resting his elbows on his knees, so as to support his chin upon his hands, and at the same time get a few inches nearer the low basket chair in which she sat.

She shook her head as if to gain a moment's respite.

'Not anything I wish to remember,' she replied naïvely.

There was a moment's pause. He spent it by fidgeting until he was yet a little nearer to her chair.

'I was afraid you had forgotten what good friends we used to be, and how well we used to get on together.'

'Why should you think so?' she returned gently. 'Are you not growing fanciful in your old age?'

'I do not know. I thought you seemed to have forgotten,' he replied quietly; 'but you are quite right in saying I am growing old, Dolly.'

'Oh, no! I do not think so,' was the quick reply.

'Don't you, Dolly?' he whispered, leaning still further forward as he spoke.

Again Dolly shook her head.

There was a long and awkward silence after this. Dolly had a curious tightening feeling in the region of her heart; and as to his, it was behaving in a still more unruly manner, and was beating like a sledge-hammer.

It was a dangerous moment. He was on the very

point of saying more than he had any right to say; and Dolly, all unconsciously, was waiting, expecting him to do so.

But the moment passed, and at the end of it Captain Denham drew suddenly back, and left unsaid the wild words which had been so very near his lips.

It was the first time in his life that he had ever resisted the temptation of making love to a woman who attracted his admiration when the possibility of doing so was within his grasp; but then, for the first time in his life, love had sunk below the surface, and really entered into his heart.

With a quick, impatient sigh, he flung himself back into his chair.

'You have far more sense than I have, Dolly,' he announced abruptly, in quite a different tone of voice.

Did a shade of pallor chase away the blush upon her cheek? Did the light die suddenly out of her eyes, and a hard, cold expression replace the smile upon her lips?

It all happened in a moment, and was gone; but Jack, with a quickening pulse, and an inward conscious-stricken pain, had noted it before it went.

'I always used to have, you may possibly remember,' was the calm reply. 'Seven! Why, I must run away at once and dress.'

And Miss Vernon, with the self-possession of an empress, and the carriage of a queen, suited her actions to her words by rising and leaving him alone.

Left alone, Captain Denham gazed for several minutes thoughtfully into the fire.

'I know how it will be,' he said to himself slowly at last. 'I know I shall not be able to carry it through in a satisfactory manner, and, hard as it is to do so, it is unquestionably my duty to give up my visit here, and depart as soon as possible. For her sake I must do it. Heaven knows, I have no wish to cause her a moment's pain.'

CHAPTER IV.

A BAD BEGINNING.

'We look before and after,
And pine for what is not!'
SHELLEY.

CAPTAIN DENHAM went upstairs to dress for dinner that evening with his mind full of those good intentions with which, they say, the road to a certain wholly unmentionable place is paved.

His love for Dolly, and the knowledge that she was more than half inclined to return that love, had brought very grave thoughts into his mind.

Fate was dealing very hardly with him, so he told himself, quite forgetting that sometimes we are masters of our fate; and that, if his lot was a rather unpleasant one, the fact of its being so was due entirely to his own fault.

It was hard, abominably hard, that when everything might have been so extremely agreeable to him, circumstances chose to step in and render them impracticable; but he must bear the burden of it upon his own shoulders, and Dolly must never know how much the bearing of it cost him.

Captain Denham would have been a really good fellow had he not had one strong, unconquerable fault. He had a kind heart, a generous disposition, and had every intention of being a highly honourable man. There was true metal underneath; but through it ran the fault which had been the bane of his life, and which stood in a fair way of being the bane of Dolly's life also.

In some ways he had a character as firm and reliable as a granite rock, but where a pretty face was concerned, he was as weak as water.

He was an ardent admirer of beauty; he possessed a highly impressionable heart; and, at all favourable circumstances, he was very apt indeed to let his feelings run away with him.

He had firmly made up his mind to put himself out of reach of temptation this time. He loved Dolly, and he

was determined that with her, at any rate, he would act quite openly. There must be no shadow of a flirtation between them, and he would tell her a little fact he fancied she was at present quite in ignorance of, before many hours were over.

He had made a bad beginning, but there the matter must end.

So said Captain Denham to himself as he stood, ready dressed for dinner, by the drawing-room fire that same evening; quite forgetting that a bad beginning in an affair of this kind is not unlike the first step down a precipice, and about as difficult to retrace.

The hall clock chimed the half-hour after seven as the door opened, and Dolly quietly entered the room.

For a second she paused upon the threshold, evidently surprised to find that he was there before her.

She knew instinctively that he was waiting for her; that he had hurried over his dressing operations so as to ensure a five minutes' *tête-à-tête*, and she was right. It was thus that Captain Denham began to keep his good intentions; it was thus that the bad beginning he had made an hour ago urged him onwards, against his will, by the downward path.

For he had no right to be waiting there in the Wyndeane drawing-room for a possible five minutes' *tête-à-tête* with his host's young daughter. No man living had much less right to be doing so than he!

Up in his own room he had said to himself that he would be strong, but that the temptation to see her again at the soonest possible moment was stronger than he; that he must see her, must not lose a moment of her society, since he must so soon deny himself the pleasure of it for evermore, but while in her presence he would be strong.

That was when he was alone in his own room; and now she stood before him, looking a thousand times more bewitching and lovable than ever.

Never had Dolly Vernon looked better than she did at that moment. The shimmering diamond crescent in her hair seemed to lend an almost ethereal light to the large

grey eyes beneath it, and the white silk dinner dress she wore was made in a plain, rather stiff fashion, which suited her to perfection.

It was a dress which would have, perhaps, seemed more fitting on a far older woman, but the result of putting it on to a girl of seventeen was undeniably successful.

It had been, as all her clothes were, entirely of her own choosing, and she had put it on for the first time that evening. She liked it, and would have told you that she thought it 'neat,' but she little knew how its rigid outlines contrasted against her rounded neck and arms, and how more than charming she looked in it.

Jack Denham's breath came quick and fast as he looked down at her in silence, and each moment as it passed saw his good intentions slipping away from him one by one.

Dolly was tantalisingly lovely and irresistibly lovable, and those two facts put every other thought quite out of Captain Denham's head.

'Have you the very slightest idea of how pretty you are?' he inquired suddenly, almost below his breath.

There was no answer; with an impetuous, half-impatient movement, Dolly turned away and took up her position several yards from him on the other side of the broad open hearth.

In a moment he regretted his words—regretted them bitterly.

'Have I offended you, Dolly?' he inquired penitently.

'Not exactly offended me, Jack,' she replied rather stiffly; 'but I do not like those sort of speeches. I am not used to them.'

'Thank Heaven for that!' he murmured to himself, and he was quite unconscious that she could hear his words.

But Dolly did hear them, and her manner instantly softened.

'I am not cross about it,' she said, after a slight pause, in a manner which was a strange mixture of dignity and childishness, coquetry and truth.

'I did not mean to say it; but I could not help myself,' he whispered, still half penitently; but as

he spoke he lessened the distance between them by a good half.

In another second one of her small slender hands was in his grasp.

Such a pretty little hand it was! So soft; so white; so extremely kissable! And it lay trembling, but unresistingly, in his, while its owner, trembling also, stood there beside him with averted eyes and a downcast, blushing face.

Captain Denham had told himself that for her sake he must and would be strong, and it was thus that he was holding to that good resolution, thus that he was resisting a temptation which but a very short time ago he had told himself he would put away from him for ever, and withstand with an iron will.

'I would give very nearly everything I possess to kiss it!' he whispered at last, in a very low whisper indeed, close to Dolly's ear.

Again a silence, broken only by the hurried throbbings of two human hearts. Dolly's face was still averted, but her hand was not withdrawn.

'May I—darling?' he asked very softly, very humbly.

Dolly gave a little gasp and took her hand away.

'No,' she replied hurriedly. 'No, Jack; please don't. Go away! I do not like it.'

It was a childish answer, and it came from a child; a child who possessed a woman's heart, and found the possession of it almost unendurable.

And Jack Denham, realising in a moment how it was with her, and what he had done, drew hastily back and felt overpowered with bitter self-reproach.

Had the Squire chanced to come in just then, Captain Denham would have made some excuse to leave the house next morning, and would have left it not to return for many a long day.

But instead Dolly suddenly looked up and laid her hand upon his arm.

'I am sorry I was cross,' she said simply. 'Do not look so grieved about it, Jack. I—I—did not quite mean what I said, dear.'

Captain Denholm grew a little white; for a moment he gazed down into that fair upraised face; one last struggle he made, and then, 'My darling! My darling!' he exclaimed passionately. 'I love you! Heaven above knows how I love you!'

She was in his arms, and it was not her hand but her face which he was kissing as he spoke.

'Oh Jack, dear Jack,' she whispered at last. 'I am so glad—so very, very glad!'

That was all; in another moment they were standing yards apart, for the hall door bell had pealed loudly through the house, and in the distance there were noises of opening and closing doors.

Presently Price announced 'Lady Francis Fairsmore nd 'Lady Mary Grey.'

Lady Francis Fairsmore, with a smile upon her lips, greeted Dolly in a manner which proclaimed that they were close friends.

She was a little dark-eyed brunette; certainly not really pretty, but one of those trim, smartly-made women, always gay and sparkling and *bien habile*, whom you remark in a crowded room long before you discover that in that same room there are dozens of women possessing far better features and infinitely prettier faces.

At seventeen Lady Francis had married a certain millionaire of the name of Fairsmore; at two-and-twenty she was a widow, and the owner of one of the nicest houses and best properties in Mudshire.

Although not born in the best of purple, Mr Charles Fairsmore had been fairly justified in considering himself a gentleman. His grandfather, it is true, had had no pretentions in that direction whatever, but then he had amassed a vast fortune, and he had sent his only son to Eton, and put him into a crack cavalry regiment. That son, Charles' father, had married a lady, retired from the service, and settled down in a highly respectable manner as a landed proprietor.

So far, so good; but Charles Fairsmore's father had not contented himself with this. He was now a landed

proprietor, it is true, a landed proprietor in the midst of a dozen other land proprietors—all of them good old-fashioned Tories to the backbone, and to a man inclined to present a cold shoulder to the new-comer, because he was a new-comer, and, what was worse, a millionaire. Money can buy a fine old house and property; but money, whatever may be said to the contrary, is not yet able to buy popularity.

And it was popularity that Captain Fairsmore had aimed at; it was popularity which he meant to have.

He got it. Got it within the first year of his residence amongst the Muddletonites. Got it by avoiding any sign of ostentation, as if it were a plague, and keeping foxes.

So when he died, leaving an only son, that same son, with his father's vast fortune still intact, had been a golden pill most people were quite prepared to swallow. Lady Huntington, Lady Fanny's mother, had been more than willing to do so; and as to Lady Fanny, the man had had a very prepossessing exterior, and Lady Fanny fell over head and ears in love with it.

Her marriage had not been a source of unmitigated bliss to Lady Francis; Charles Fairsmore was selfish, ill-tempered, and far too fond of drink; but she had managed both him and his failing better than most women could have done, and if she had not been quite so deeply in love with her husband at the time of his death as she had been five years previously, neither he nor anybody else ever even suspected it.

That was three years ago; she was five-and-twenty now, and although she still wore black, her face had lost the rather careworn expression which five anxious, unhappy years had printed on it.

Was there just a touch of stiffness in her manner as she turned to give her hand to Captain Denham? Perhaps so. She was sincere to a fault, and had lost much popularity because she had none of that ready 'humbug' at her finger tips which is as necessary in society as oil is to the wheels of a coach.

Lady Francis did not like Captain Denham. She

could not quite have told you why. She was singular in her dislike, for he was as a rule an extremely popular man. She herself thought she was rather unreasonable in it; but the fact remained, she neither liked nor trusted him, and his visits to Wyndeane invariably made her feel uneasy.

'So you have come to see what sport we can show you in Mudshire this year?' she remarked pleasantly enough, as she laid her hand in his.

But as she smiled up into his face, Captain Denham was uncomfortably conscious of the fact that those dark eyes of hers were criticising him closely—and that the result of that investigation was not wholly in his favour.

Captain Denham had never been able to what he called 'hit it off particularly well' with Dolly's bosom friend, and on this occasion, under the cold glance of her disapproving eye, he did not enjoy himself at all.

Why did Dolly attach herself so persistently to her father and Lady Mary Grey? Why on earth was Ventnor so unpunctual? So he asked himself impatiently more than once during the following ten minutes.

Painfully conscious that he had very recently been acting in a far from honourable manner, he grew every second more uneasy, and Lady Francis, noticing that this was so, found her manner growing stiffer and stiffer.

It was a relief to them both when the door opened, and young Lord Ventnor came in like a whirlwind.

He was nearly a quarter of an hour late, a fact he at once proceeded to apologise for.

CHAPTER V.

LADY FRANCIS IS SUSPICIOUS.

'Of all the torments, all the cares
With which our lives are curst;
Of all the plagues a lover bears,
Sure rivals are the worst.'

WALSH.

'I AM most dreadfully sorry, Squire,' he exclaimed penitently, 'but I really could not help it.'

'Do not apologise, George. I daresay these ladies will forgive you,' was the good-natured reply. And as he spoke, the Squire offered his arm to Lady Francis Fairsmore.

'How are you, Denham? It is an age since we have seen you! Why, Lady Mary, are you still at Fairscroft? This reflects great credit on us all.'

Lady Mary turned to smile at him over her shoulder as she passed through the doorway by Captain Denham's side.

'Does it not?' she returned brightly. 'I felt sure you would feel it so. Well, I am going to stay until March, so my friends will have a really good opportunity of becoming bored to death with me.'

'Is she fishing, Dolly—this young lady who finds us all so deadly stupid that she rarely honours us with the pleasure of her company?' questioned George laughingly.

Lady Mary laughed. She had an honest, pleasant way of laughing, albeit that her detractors said she laughed too often and too loud.

Lady Mary Grey had a good many detractors; and on the other hand she had innumerable admirers. She was extremely amusing, and a tremendous talker, and she was quite invaluable at a dull dinner party, or in a country house; but she had a rather inconvenient habit of calling a spade a spade, and she could make herself remarkably unpleasant to people she did not like.

She did not share her sister's opinion of Captain Denham, however; he had plenty to say for himself, and was

exceptionably good-looking. Lady Mary liked people who could talk well; she preferred a handsome face to a plain one; and she seldom troubled herself to look below the surface. As she said, 'As long as the surface was pleasant, social matters went along smoothly, and that was all she cared about.' Lady Mary lived in society and for society, and she was never thoroughly happy out of a crowd.

She now turned to Captain Denham, and for a short time devoted her undivided attention to him.

'Lord Ventnor,' said Lady Francis presently, 'excuse my personal remark, but have you hurt yourself?'

George hastily put his hand up to a large piece of sticking-plaster on the side of his face.

'Am I quite unpresentable?' he inquired hastily.

'Why, what have you been doing, George?' exclaimed Dolly.

By this time Lord Ventnor was the centre of observation, and everyone was wondering how it was that the state of his face on the side next Lady Francis had escaped their observation for so long.

George laughed, and explained the matter by saying that he 'had been capsized on his way there, and that it had been that which had made him so abominably late.'

'I am breaking that new bay of mine in to harness,' he continued, addressing the Squire. 'Only got him back from Drayton yesterday. I do not think he can have had him in single harness; at any rate he cleared himself out of my dogcart quicker than I ever saw any horse perform the same feat before.'

'It was hardly giving the horse a fair trial,' remonstrated Dolly, 'taking him out at night for the first time.'

'It was stupid of me, I confess; especially so as things turned out,' returned George apologetically.

'Where did it happen?' inquired the Squire.

'Just outside the Park gates.'

'Your dogcart was smashed?'

'Very much smashed,' was the laughing reply.

'I wonder you arrived here so soon,' said Lady Francis gravely.

'Oh, I came straight on. The horse was none the worse, as far as I could see, and I told my man to take him home.' Then he laughed. 'Talking of my man, I wish you could have seen him, sitting in a very moist ditch, grievously offended at the liberty fate had taken with his dignity.'

'He might be excused for objecting to the situation, I should think,' replied Lady Francis, in the same grave manner as before.

'Oh, I do not agree with you, Fanny!' laughed her sister. 'I am sure he is not at all the sort of man Lord Ventnor ought to have. These accidents are rather frequent occurrences, are they not?' she inquired, turning to Lord Ventnor as she spoke.

'This is not the first,' was the grave reply; but a smile flickered round the corners of George's mouth, and the next moment he laughed. 'The misfortune was that Spruce happened to be away for a day or two. If he had been with me I should have been here five minutes sooner. I have never upset him yet, and not found him standing on his feet a second afterwards, inquiring, "What next, my Lord?" in unmoved accents.'

Lady Francis did not even smile, though everyone else was doing so, for George's manner was very dry and quaint.

'I hate carriage accidents,' she observed quietly. 'It is very lucky it was no worse.'

'Lady Francis is quite right, George,' agreed the Squire. 'You will be having an accident too many some day.'

'Do not listen to them, George,' exclaimed Dolly. 'There's a good boy! They want to make a regular muff of you between them.'

Everyone laughed, Lady Francis with the rest; but she stole a curious glance of inquiry and surprise at Dolly as she did so.

There was something else expressed in that glance of Lady Fanny's—a something which her sister's quick eyes did not fail to note.

'You are a nice young woman, Dolly,' exclaimed, that young lady jestingly 'I really think I ought to tell Mrs Coningham how you are training her only son. I would not trust him to your tender mercies, if I were she.'

Now Lady Mary had no intention of implying anything that would in any way be 'awkward,' in thus addressing Dolly. In common with many other people, she fully realised Lord Ventnor's deep attachment to his cousin; and, also in common with other people, she quite believed that his attachment was returned.

Lord Ventnor and Dolly Vernon were popularly supposed to be engaged; and although that engagement was not as yet publicly announced, Lady Mary, who was rather outspoken, and knew herself to be amongst a family party, saw no harm in lightly alluding to that engagement.

If there had been no supposititious engagement, of course there would have been nothing out of the way in that little remark; but, as it was, and made as it was, its effect was rather curious.

The Squire smiled, and nodded a good-humoured approval to the girl who made it.

Captain Denham, who by no means appreciated George Ventnor as a rival, or underrated his merits as a suitor, glanced up sharply at Dolly, from Dolly to George, and from George down to his plate, where, for several minutes, with an uneasy expression upon his face, he kept his eyes fixed resolutely.

Lady Francis glanced hastily at her sister, coloured painfully, and frowned a distressed, unconscious, unhappy little frown.

George, glancing at Lady Mary, smiled as his eyes met hers, and then turned to look at his cousin with an expression on his face which had a curious mixture of wistfulness and pride in it. Wistful, because he felt she did not love him; proud because he loved her, and was proud of doing so.

Captain Denham, apparently seeing nothing, noted and understood that glance. For some time after doing so he

was very silent. What he was thinking of he alone knew, but, judging by the expression upon his face, his thoughts were very far from being either happy or comfortable ones.

Even the fact that Dolly, who was the only perfectly unconscious person in the room, laughed gaily at Lady Mary, and made a light, careless answer, that had the effect of vanishing at once any awkwardness that her speech had caused, did not appear to console Captain Denham at all. He did not seem to even hear her words, but remained absorbed in his own uneasy thoughts.

'A very bad account of poor Hartlebury to-day,' George was remarking when Captain Denham again became conscious of the conversation of his fellow creatures. 'They say that if he pulls round he will be ordered off abroad.'

'I am very sorry to hear it. So they say. I cannot say how sorry I am,' murmured the Squire.

'The master?' questioned Jack Denham. 'Is it so bad as that?'

'Oh, very bad indeed,' replied George.

'Poor chap,' said Captain Denham thoughtfully; 'if he is ordered abroad, who will take the hounds? You ought to, Ventnor.'

George shook his head in a decided negative.

'There is only one man in Mudshire any of us could do with after Hartlebury,' he returned quietly. 'We all agreed about that to-day, and, if he will not listen to reason, why, then, the Muddleton will not be worth the following.'

Dolly glanced across the table at her father, a smile upon her lips, and a proud, happy light shining in her eyes.

'He will listen to reason,' she said quietly. 'I gave them my word for that this morning.'

'Your word?' repeated her father, with an almost imperceptible smile.

'Yes,' she returned naïvely; 'it is law here, is it not? I always thought so, at any rate.'

'Of course it is, Dolly,' acquiesced George. 'Unquestionably.'

CHAPTER VI.

'I THINK YOU LIKE HIM, FANNY.'

'There's noan sa blynd bud tha can see
Some fawts i' other men;
A've sometimes met we folk at thowt
They saw sum in thersen.'
Natterin' Nan.

DINNER was over, and the gentlemen had joined the ladies in the drawing-room. The Squire and Lady Mary Grey were sitting together near the fire, talking and laughing. George was hanging over Dolly's chair, as he sat on the edge of a table just behind her.

She was at the far end of the room, sitting behind the pianoforte, over which her fingers were straying in sudden little snatches of various airs.

First an Irish melody, then an operatic air, next part of a popular valse, after that a movement of Beethoven's, and by-and-by a few bars of a chant. It was a way of hers when she was playing; only a sort of running accompaniment to the conversation going on around her; but it was pretty, and it was well done. As she played she kept up a low conversation with George.

'I believe you are right about Stevenson. I think he is coming between you and your tenants, George. And I cannot think the total want of consideration which is shown to the cottagers is either necessary or right.'

'My dear girl, you know that it has annoyed me; that it is not my wish or intention—'

'I know that,' she interrupted quickly; and as she spoke she glanced straight up into his eyes and smiled. It was a very expressive smile, and said very plainly, You may be sure I think you as nearly perfect as any human being can be.'

Captain Denham, from his seat by Lady Francis' side, on a sofa at the other side of the room, caught sight of that fair, upraised face, and that loving, trustful glance,

and he quite forgot that Lady Francis was speaking to him at that moment.

George smiled very sweetly as he looked down into that upraised face; and then, as Dolly's eyes fell on the keys of the pianoforte again, he drew himself up into an upright position, and for several minutes became wrapt in thought. When he leant over her again he whispered something in her ear which brought an unmistakable blush into her cheeks.

And this is what he whispered,—

'What has happened, Dolly? You are not yourself to-night.'

'Like a good boy, ask no questions,' she replied quickly. 'Perhaps I can explain the matter to you some day.'

'Very well. Whatever it is, luck go with it, since it makes you look so happy, dear.'

'Thank you, George,' she murmured softly; and there was something in her manner which made George study the face so near him closely, as it became once again unconscious of his proximity, and overshadowed by an expression of well-contented, happy thought.

Meanwhile Captain Denham, seeing it all and hearing nothing, did not appreciate this little tableau; and, perhaps not unnaturally, he misinterpreted the scene.

He did not think the weaker sex by any means faultless; partly, no doubt, because he had not found them so. He had very often fancied himself in love, but it had never been his lot to fall in love with a really good woman until now; and he was one of those men to whom a simple Platonic friendship was an utter impossibility.

He had always divided women into two classes—the good-looking and the plain. Plain women were not in Captain Denham's line; they were an eyesore, and, in his opinion, as well as being an eyesore, they were, most of them, remarkably uninteresting. As to the good-looking women, they were all of them more or less charming, all more or less interesting, most of them disposed to be fast, and every one of them flirts.

Now, Dolly Vernon was beyond all doubt of the good-looking class.

Fast he knew that she was not, for no one could possibly have spent an hour in Dolly's society without knowing that there was nothing fast about her. There was a quiet dignity in her movements, a soft expression in her large eyes, and her manner of saying or doing the veriest trifle was essentially womanly and charming. No! She was certainly not fast! But a flirt? Was she a flirt? Had he flattered himself too soon that at last he had found his ideal, and after all, was she only like the rest of womankind?

His whole heart had gone out to her. Gone, with a completeness and earnestness which surprised him; and the thought that she had perhaps only been amusing herself at his expense, that, perhaps, her cousin was a no less privileged person than himself, was maddening, simply maddening!

He knew her really so little! Why should she be so different to others? He felt instinctively that to doubt her was almost a crime; and yet he doubted! The better half of humanity naturally suffer for the errors of the worst half, and we see things only through the narrow compass of our own experience.

So Captain Denham, of course, concluded that Dolly was an arrant flirt. An hour and a half ago was she not vowing eternal constancy to him; and now she was flirting openly and outrageously with her cousin George.

To make matters the more unendurable, George was looking his very best—if such a remark is applicable, when the subject of it is a big manly young Englishman; plain, but attractive-looking; possessed of as fine a figure as any young man need wish for; and a face which, by its honesty, geniality, and frankness of expression, it really did you good to see.

Captain Denham's eyes turned away from that suggestive tableau near the pianoforte, and glanced round the room; which, in every nook and corner,

in every artistic fold of drapery, and every group of flowers, showed forth the perfect taste of the woman who inhabited it. Then from the room, his eyes strayed back again to the two figures by the pianoforte; and it came home to Jack Denham with a startling conviction, that everything was quite complete and perfect at Wyndeane,—except himself.

A pained and weary expression came over his face; an expression which had a touch of remorse in it, and a still more defined touch of self pity.

Lady Francis noticed it, and wondered greatly what it meant. She had already divined that her old suspicion about him had not been unfounded; he was in love with Dolly; but the expression she now saw written on his face was not caused by either love or jealousy; she felt certain that something else lay hidden underneath it.

Just then Dolly's eyes turned towards the ill-assorted couple on the sofa; and such a soft light came into them, as they met Captain Denham's glance, that Lady Francis forgot her speculations as to that gentleman's feelings, and received a sudden shock in regard to Dolly's.

The colour suddenly surged up into the little woman's face, and then died as suddenly away again; leaving her many shades paler than her wont. For some reason, best known to herself, the discovery which she had made agitated her terribly.

It was some time before she spoke; when she did so, it was to remark quietly, 'Vera looks very well to-night.'

Captain Denham's sunburnt face suddenly assumed a very ruddy hue, and he started perceptibly as this remark fell upon his ears, carrying with it, as it did, a sequel to his thoughts. He could not help either the start or the blush, for he had been taken unawares; but he was a thorough man of the world for all that, and he met the glance of the dark eyes, which were fixed questioningly and suspiciously upon his face, and answered with just the

right degree of warmth, 'Quite lovely, Lady Francis! It is marvellous how greatly she has improved in looks during the last year.'

'I cannot see that. She has always been one of the best-looking girls one sees anywhere,' returned her ladyship tartly; and then added suddenly, 'and one of the luckiest! I suppose she will marry her cousin, and I can imagine no happier or better fate for her than that.'

For a second Captain Denham was silent, and then he remarked casually, 'He is a very good fellow, certainly.' Then, after a pause, 'And he is very fortunate in possessing such a charming and influential champion as Lady Francis Fairsmore.'

Lady Francis tapped her little foot against the carpet, and looked undeniably annoyed. She had never liked Captain Denham, and at that moment she liked him less than ever.

'If my influence, poor as it is, can ever do Lord Ventnor a good turn, it shall certainly do it,' she returned coldly; and then, having consoled her wounded feelings by this ominous threat, she got up and sauntered across the room to her sister's vicinity. She was very angry with Captain Denham, and perhaps rather unjust in her anger. One thing she left him assured of, and that was this—that if she, Dolly's dearest friend, could come between Dolly and him, she would assuredly do it.

After Lady Francis left him, Captain Denham sat quietly on that rather distant sofa by himself. He had risen hastily as she moved away, but when she sat down close to her sister's side, he resumed his seat, and, falling into a reverie, made no attempt to join the others.

Every now and then he glanced surreptitiously at Dolly's white clad figure. Her face he could not see, for she had now forsaken the pianoforte stool, and was sitting in a low chair near it, with her back to the room, still talking to George Ventnor, and every time he looked at her the line of care on Captain Den-

ham's handsome face grew deeper. He was thinking deeply; he was doing even more than that—he was struggling against his love, and trying to face his duty.

By-and-by he listlessly took up a book which was lying on a table near him, and opened it abstractedly. Somewhat curiously, the first words his glance fell upon were these,—'The highest law of this mighty truth is that under which it is vowed to woman. Whomsoever you leave unaided, you must not deceive, nor injure, nor leave unaided, according to your power, any woman, of whatever rank. Believe me, every virtue of the higher phases of manly character begin in this.' As he laid down the book, these words of Ruskin's seemed to him to be a direct answer to his thoughts. A resolute look settled on his face, and he got up and crossed the room to join the group by the fireside. In a few minutes more he had entered into a hot discussion on the probabilities of a European war, and the existing state of the English army. Captain Denham, whatever else he was or was not, was a soldier to his finger tips; and as he spoke, with bitter indignation and heartfelt warmth, Lady Francis stole a glance at him, and forgot, for the time being, that she disliked and distrusted him.

'There is some good in him,' she mentally observed. 'Even in a case like this, one must be just. I must find out more about this tiresome man.'

Dolly Vernon and Lord Ventnor joined the party at this moment, Dolly remarking, as she sat down on the arm of her father's chair, 'That whereas she and George had been discussing the affairs of an individual property, the rest seemed to be discussing the affairs of the State, and that they thought, on the whole, the latter was the more important subject of the two.' After that she was very silent as she sat there listening to that more important subject; it interested her painfully.

'It is one thing to be a soldier,' she thought to herself, 'and quite another to be a woman. I wish things could be settled by letting General Kaulbers

and the Sobrangi fight it out. I believe if I were a man I should love to be a soldier, not a soldier of the future, but a soldier of the past; but since I am not a man, I hate this wholesale slaughter business.'

But in spite of that painful anxiety, Dolly was very happy. She felt very proud of Captain Denham.

Late that night two women were leaning back against the padded cushions of a neat, darkly-painted brougham.

'Why did you scowl at me so terribly at dinner-time, Fan?' inquired one of them.

'I thought it would have been better if you had left that remark of yours about Dolly and George Ventnor unsaid, Molly. It was certainly not in the best of taste,' replied the other quietly.

'Really, Fanny, if one cannot make a laughing remark to a girl one has known for years, about her manner of treating the man she is going to marry, things are coming to a pretty pass in Mudshire,' exclaimed Lady Mary indignantly.

'You need not sneer at poor Mudshire, Molly!' returned her sister calmly; 'and you miss the point of the matter when you say that Dolly is going to marry her cousin.'

'You think that she means to throw him over?'

'They are not engaged, Mary; they never have been; and as far as I can see, it is very probable that they never will be.'

Lady Mary Grey expressed her astonishment by a low expressive exclamation, and then for several minutes lapsed into silence.

'I am so glad, Fanny dear,' she murmured at last, laying one of her rather large, firm, white hands upon her sister's knee, and speaking in an affectionate, low tone.

'What do you mean?' asked Lady Francis, after a long pause, and with an evidently studied calmness of manner.

'Mean, Fan! Why, between us there is no harm in my speaking candidly. I think you like him yourself, Fanny! That is what I mean!'

'You think so many foolish things, dear, that I shall not trouble myself to contradict you in this, the most foolish of them all,' replied her sister quietly, as she drew the fur carriage rug closer round her knees.

'She cannot tell a story,' thought Lady Mary to herself. 'Poor Fanny! she always was rather a fool!'

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

'We are not worse at once—the course of evil
Begins so slowly, and from such slight source
An infant's hand might stem its breach with clay.'
OLD PLAY.

EARLY the next morning the door of Dolly's especial sitting-room opened quietly, and Captain Denham entered the room.

She was sitting at her writing-table, surrounded by account books and letters. A moment ago she had been deep in the perplexities of arithmetic, but as the door opened, she glanced up, a rush of crimson covered her face, and, after a second's hesitation, she rose and advanced a step towards it.

Captain Denham had entered the room with his mind full of very grave thoughts—indeed, he had had a really bad night thinking over a bad business, and he had firmly resolved that, cost what it might, he would confess his sins first thing in the morning, and come to a clear understanding with the Squire's daughter.

But as he looked down at her, standing there with downcast eyes and crimson cheeks, he might just as well have slept comfortably, and not troubled himself at all to think about the future, for all the good those grave thoughts did him.

Perhaps the temptation to take that graceful, childish figure in his arms; to kiss that lovely, quivering face, was greater than many men could have with-

stood, had they known, as he did, that the owner of them loved him; at any rate, it was considerably too great to be withstood by Captain John Denham.

'You love me! I believe you love me, my darling,' he whispered at last, after a long and blissful silence.

There was no answer, none at all, but Captain Denham needed none. Dolly had hidden her face against his shoulder, and her heart was throbbing wildly close to his.

By-and-by she gently drew herself away, and began rather nervously to tidy the scattered papers on her writing-table. Her heart was full to overflowing, and she was longing to run away and be alone with this great new happiness.

She wondered what her father would say about it. Of course he could not fail to approve of Jack, but it might be a great surprise to him, because he looked upon her still as quite a child.

In spite of her happiness, she was feeling rather grave during the few minutes' silence which followed, and Jack Denham's next words were a great and painful shock to her over-strung nerves. They acted just in the same way as a cold shower-bath does upon a hot day, and they sent an unpleasant chill right down to her heart.

'I know you love me, Dolly,' he said, 'but what a terrible little flirt you are.'

Re-action had set in, and he was overpowered with regret; and yet he could think of no better way than this of turning the current of her thoughts.

'Jack,' she exclaimed, in a tone of deepest consternation, 'tell me, dear, what do you mean?'

'You do not even know what the word flirtation means, do you, Dolly?' replied that gentleman with a smile, and as he spoke he tried to take her hand in his, but she put him quietly aside with a firmness and dignity that rather startled him.

'Not quite, perhaps,' she replied very quietly, 'but I know it means something very, very horrid.'

Captain Denham was unquestionably astonished; he was more, he was full of consternation.

'What about last night, and Ventnor?' he inquired, in a rather shame-faced manner.

Dolly was still regarding him steadily with a grave, surprised, puzzled expression in her eyes; but as he said this, she started and looked inexpressibly troubled—his light words had touched a new chord, and were jarring painfully against her refined, sensitive nature.

'My dear little woman,' continued Captain Denham, who thoroughly realised that something was wrong, but had no suspicion as to why his remark had been so displeasing; 'pray do not misunderstand me. I am not blaming you. He is a very nice young fellow, and, no doubt, you find him amusing. I do not mind it in the least.'

'Oh, Jack,' she replied earnestly, 'do not talk to me like that: it hurts me so. You know that —that George is my cousin, almost my brother, and as to you—oh, Jack! you know I love you in quite a different way.'

A complete change had come over Dolly; her manner showed it. A few minutes previously she had been a child, overpowered by a love which she hardly understood; now, in the face of an unexpected trouble she had, in the anxiety of the moment, laid aside all shyness and become a woman.

'I do know it, Dolly,' replied Captain Denham solemnly. 'Heaven forgive me!' and then he turned abruptly away, and walked to a distant window, where he stood gazing outwards with his back to the room.

Dolly watched him with a troubled expression upon her face, out of which every vestige of colour had flown; and a long, painful silence followed. At last she also crossed the room towards that distant window.

'What is the matter, Jack?' she whispered gently, laying her hand upon his arm. 'What did you mean?'

Captain Denham did not return the glance of

those upraised eyes. To do him justice, he was trying very hard indeed to resist a temptation which he ought to have resisted from the first.

'I want to tell you something, Dolly,' he murmured, in a direfully distressed tone of voice. 'Something I ought to have told you before, only it is so terribly hard to do it.'

A terrible oppressive assurance that something was very wrong came to Dolly as a certainty. Her heart had almost ceased to beat, and she rested her hand upon a table near her as if she could not stand quite as steadily as usual; but her voice when she spoke was extremely calm and gentle. The man she loved was in trouble, and Dolly, who was a thorough woman, put aside her own troubles at once in the sight of his.

'Whatever it is, dear, it will be better told,' she replied quietly. 'Tell me; pray do not hesitate to do so. I will try to help you if I can.'

'Even if it means that we must part, Dolly?' he whispered hoarsely.

'Yes, Jack,' she replied firmly, without a moment's hesitation.

Her worst fears were realised at that moment, and with all the acute misery of seventeen, it seemed to her that nothing in all her future life could ever by any possibility go right again; that she would always feel just as hopelessly miserable as she was feeling then. Her future spread itself out before her eyes in a vivid panorama, and she wondered, in a vague way, how she was going to go on living that life with all its long days, weeks, months, and years; but no thought of blaming Jack Denham for this unhappy state of affairs entered her head. She turned towards him, and with an infinite pity took his hand in hers.

'Jack, dear,' she pleaded gently, 'tell me all about it.'

Captain Denham looked down into her steadfast,

tender, grey eyes. His heart was beating wildly with a hundred conflicting emotions, and he could not utter a word.

'Oh, darling, how can I part with you when I love you so much? I cannot do it!' he exclaimed at last, in a low voice broken with emotion.

'You know best,' she returned softly. 'I do not understand.'

'You love me, darling?' he returned evasively.

'Oh, Jack, you know it,' was the low reply.

Captain Denham for a few minutes again was silent.

'And yet if you thought it—it wrong to do so, you would not do it?' he returned at last, almost bitterly.

The colour flew into Dolly's cheeks, and she made no reply.

He leant forward suddenly, and their eyes met.

'I have no right to ask that question, darling,' he pleaded wistfully, in a low, passionate tone, 'but—but—'

'Love is not like that,' said Dolly slowly.

'My darling! My own darling!' he exclaimed wildly. 'Nothing in the world shall ever really come between us! You will be true to me? You will wait? Will you wait for me, asking no questions? Wait until the day comes when I can claim you for my own?'

'You mean,' she said quietly, 'that you wish me to—to—keep our engagement a secret?'

Captain Denham, with bent head and quivering face, made no reply.

'Is that what you mean?' she continued gently. 'Tell me, Jack.'

'Oh, Dolly!' he exclaimed, 'forgive me! forgive me! I have no right to ask such a thing! I do not wish it or expect it! I would not let you do it if you would. Not really, my darling! Not when I am in my senses.'

'Is—is it wrong?' she asked slowly.

'Would you have consented?' he returned quietly.

She shook her head. 'Not to an engagement, Jack. At least not unless I could have told my father,' she replied in a low, troubled voice; 'but, if it had not been wrong, I would have promised to wait, because I love you, Jack.'

For the first time her lips quivered and her voice shook. In another second she was sobbing in his arms.

'My darling! I am only too glad to accept that solution of our difficulties — conditionally,' he whispered soothingly. 'You are to be free, free as if I did not exist, free to marry any one you like—'

'Oh, Jack!' murmured Dolly.

'But you may be sure that to my dying day I shall be true to you, and that, the moment I can do so, I shall come and ask you whether you still care enough for me to be my wife,' continued her lover firmly. 'Until then, Dolly, we must part.'

But a week went by and that parting had not yet taken place. They agreed that that one last visit must come to a natural end, and that there was no need to break into it in such tremendous haste.

At least he told her so, and she, unconscious of any reason why their love was wrong, dreading the future after he had gone, listened and yielded to the persuasions of the man she loved.

CHAPTER VIII.

'I SHOULD NOT INTERFERE, IF I WERE YOU.'

'Love, nursed among pleasures, is faithless as they;
But the love born of sorrow, like sorrow, is true.'

MOORE.

'I AM going to drive over to Wyndeane this afternoon, Mary,' remarked Lady Francis Fairsmore to her sister, about a week later on.

As she spoke, Lady Francis drew on a thick dogskin glove, and she had the air of a person who was in a hurry to be off, and did not wish to be delayed.

Lady Mary looked up from her comfortable position in the depths of a large, softly-cushioned chair, and yawned slightly behind a book which she was holding in her hand; then she turned her head, so as to glance out of the window, at the snow-flakes which were falling thickly. Lady Mary was doubtful as to whether she ought not to offer to accompany her sister; but she was so very comfortable where she was. Her sister's little boudoir, with its pale blue hangings, its pretty pictures, its quaint old china, and, above all, its comfortable chairs and brightly-blazing fire, suited her far better than the cold wind and falling snow outside.

'Why in the world cannot you remain comfortably at home on a day like this, Fan?' she exclaimed rather impatiently, at last.

'I do not mind the snow, and I want to go to Wyndeane,' replied her sister quietly.

Lady Mary laid down her book, and proceeded to pour some eau-de-cologne out of a gold-stoppered bottle on a table near her on to her pocket handkerchief.

'My dear Molly,' laughed her sister, 'pray save yourself the trouble of telling me that you think you feel a cold coming on! I want to go alone to-day.'

'Oh, very well, Fanny!' cheerfully acquiesced the would-be invalid.

'I shall not be long. I shall be at home for tea. Mind and keep the cakes hot,' continued Lady Francis, who no longer seemed in a hurry to depart, now that she had settled satisfactorily that she was to go alone.

Her sister nodded, and then remarked abruptly, and somewhat rudely, sister fashion,—

'I am sure you had better stay at home, Fan! Dolly does not want you at Wyndeane, now that that good-looking soldier of hers is there!'

Lady Francis took no notice of this piece of sisterly advice.

'You are going to try and interfere in that affair!'

continued her sister. 'Take my advice, and leave it alone. Dolly will not thank you for your trouble; be sure of that! If you dislike Captain Denham, one thing is certain, your dear friend does not share your opinion about him. I am not sure that I agree with you either, Fan. What do you dislike in Captain Denham?'

'The fact that he is making love to her . . . and doing it in a nasty, unmanly, underhand fashion,' replied her sister quietly.

'My dear Fanny, how do you know that? How do you know—'

'I do know it, Mary; that is enough! I know that her father has no idea of what is going on. Why, or wherefore, I cannot say; but I feel sure that that man is playing a double game.'

'Ye—s. Well, Fanny, we do not generally carry on our love affairs under our parents' noses,' put in Lady Mary, with a faint little smile.

'Speak for yourself, Molly,' returned her sister. 'I for one never knew a good man who was ashamed of admiring the girl he is going to marry.'

'Well, no dear, perhaps not,' agreed her sister doubtfully. 'But, after all, are good men so very interesting? Are they not often prigs?'

'I was not speaking of prigs, Mary, but of gentlemen,' was the quiet answer.

'Well, let us grant at once, then, that Captain Denham is not a gentleman. What good are you going to do by going to Wyndeane to-day? You can scarcely ask him his intentions,—even in the interests of your beloved Dolly; and as to saying anything to her, well, all I can say is, don't do it!'

'I was not born five years before you were, my dear creature, to need your advice on such a question as that,' replied her sister lightly. 'Ring, and tell Thomas to put on some more coals; he will let that fire nearly expire, unless you look after him; and mind and have the tea comfortably ready when I return. Good-bye, Mary!'

'Good-bye, Francis. But remember, if I were you—

especially if I were you—I would leave this little business quite alone,' replied that young lady significantly.

'No you would not, Mary, I assure you!' replied Lady Francis, quietly leaving the room.

But as she drove along through the keen, frosty air, her little face became overclouded by an expression of trouble and annoyance; and she gave one of her cheerful little bay cobs an unnecessary cut with her whip which quite surprised him.

The fact that her keen-eyed sister had discovered a carefully-hidden, painful secret of hers, annoyed her little ladyship immensely.

Put it aside, laugh at and abuse her sister as she might for her foolish fancies, it nevertheless troubled Fanny Fairsmore greatly that Mary should think that she cared for George Ventnor more than was strictly prudent. George! whom all the county knew to be an ardent lover of Dolly Vernon's. Why, the mere suggestion of such a state of affairs was, to say the least of it, abominably bad taste. Undoubtedly! but, then, why, as an ill-timed *bêtise*, did it burn and rankle in Lady Francis Fairsmore's breast?

Ah, why! Was it so very strange, if after all there was some truth in Lady Mary's fancy? Was it so very impossible? Was it so very improbable that, living so near Ventnor Castle, seeing its owner almost daily, knowing him to be as good, as honest, as charming, and, yes—as lovable a young man as he well could be, Lady Fanny should have unwittingly learnt to love him, as she never even suspected she could love any one, in the days gone by, when she had bestowed a girlish fancy upon a very different man?

Love! She often wondered now-a-days how she could ever have mistaken that earlier fancy of hers for love itself! It had begun by flattered vanity, and ended by that sense of duty which with her would ever prove the first and most powerful object of her life. Was it that same sense of duty which was influencing her now as she drove towards Wyndeane, firmly resolved to assist George Ventnor in his love affair if she

possibly could do so? Or was it that her love was deeper, truer, and more worthy of the name of love, than that feeling which so often passes for pure gold when in truth it is only very third-rate silver gilt?

Lady Francis did love George Ventnor, and she loved him as very few women, and still fewer men, ever love a fellow-creature. Loved him, really and honestly, infinitely better than she loved herself. And how few, how sadly few, of us ever love like that? How many of us would give up the object of our love, because we thought that, in so doing, we were ensuring the happiness of that loved one. How many of us would, quite putting self aside, try to assist that loved one in his or her love affair with some other man or woman?

Lady Francis knew that George Ventnor loved Dolly Vernon as he would never love any other woman. She knew that if he lost her it would be a life-long regret to him; that his best chance of happiness lay in Dolly's keeping. She also knew that Dolly was a thoroughly good and charming girl; that she was a good and devoted daughter, and would make a good and devoted wife. No petty jealousy had ever clouded Lady Fanny's liking for the girl; Lady Fanny's mind was far too broad to harbour anything petty or ignoble. But to say that she had never murmured against the hardness of her lot, that she had never wished that George loved her, instead of this girl, whom she more than suspected did not care two straws about him, is going beyond the mark. Lady Fanny was not the woman to spend much time in vain regrets; but the fact that things were as they were, in spite of her innate goodness, somehow took the 'gilt off the gingerbread' in the little lady's life.

And it was a little hard, after having played her part so admirably for so long, that her sister should have found her out.

To do Lady Mary justice, she by no means realised the extent of damage done, or she would not have said a word upon the subject to her sister, and Lady Fanny's secret was as safe in her keeping as it was in

Lady Fanny's own. Lady Francis knew both these facts, but still the matter was a trouble to her, and as she drove rapidly along the road towards Wyndeane, her face remained overclouded by an expression of pain which, in spite of adverse circumstances, was seldom seen there.

CHAPTER IX.

LADY FRANCIS'S WARNING.

'Till some were heard to curse the shrine,
Where others knelt to Heaven.'—MOORE.

'Is the Squire at home, Price?'

'Yes, my Lady.'

Lady Francis did not inquire if Miss Vernon was in also. She knew that she was not. As she had driven along the high road between Faircroft and Wyndeane, she had chanced to glance down a bye-lane as she passed it. Two figures, the figure of a man and a woman, had been visible at the end of that bye-lane, and the woman's firm, upright seat in her saddle, and trim, neat figure, could have belonged to no woman in Mudshire except Dolly Vernon. As to the man, he also had been remarkably trim and neat in his saddle, and he had been riding so very close to Dolly's side, that even that hasty glance, as she whisked past, had set Lady Francis wondering if it was not too late; if after all she would not be wiser if she acted upon her sister's advice and turned her ponies homewards.

There had certainly been something pre-eminently lover-like in those two retreating figures; and, after all, why should they not be lovers? Only a feeling of distrust in her own breast, which possibly was totally unreasonable and uncalled for. Was not this Captain Denham the Squire's chosen friend? Was not that enough, and more than enough, in his favour?

And then George Ventnor's face rose up before her.

Not as it was—gay and smiling—but as it would be, as so many faces were when all that was best and brightest in life had gone by, and only a bitter regret and memory remained. She knew how it would be with him. She knew with a woman's natural intuition—quickened in her case by love—that this was the one real love of his life.

And as to this other man; why, if Dolly did not marry him, some other woman would fill her place in his affections; he would be equally well satisfied with any other pretty face that caught his fancy.

And little Lady Fanny set her firm, white teeth, as she weighed the matter in her mind; and once again startling Butterfly with a cut of the whip, drove rapidly onwards. She fastened her reins in the leather catch, got quickly out of her carriage, and followed Price into the drawing-room. Once there, she stood by the fire thinking deeply. The task which she had set herself was extremely uncongenial to her nature; and once again, as she stood there waiting for the Squire, she almost wished that she had not undertaken it.

Glancing upwards, her eyes caught sight of a large photograph of George Ventnor which was on the mantelshelf. His laughing eyes met hers, his smiling lips seemed to smile at her. Such an open, honest, merry face it was! and in its very plainness so attractive.

Lady Francis looked at that photograph for several seconds, and then she sighed—a desperately weary little sigh.

'Fanny, my dear girl, this is delightful! I never expected such a treat upon this miserable day!' exclaimed the Squire, entering the room at this moment. 'Dolly is out, I think, but she will soon be in.'

'I doubt it, Colonel Vernon,' returned Lady Francis quietly, as she returned the hearty pressure of the Squire's fingers.

'All the better for a poor old man, my dear. For, when the child is here, he can never get a word with you.'

'Lady Francis smiled gravely.

'And it is to have a "word" with you that I came,'

she returned hurriedly, rushing at her awkward fence so as to get over it the sooner (metaphorically).

'Yes, Fanny?' questioned the Squire, instantly sobered by the gravity of her manner.

'I saw Dolly riding,' remarked that lady; and as she spoke, she sat down in a chair near her, and began to pull off her gloves in a nervous, abstracted manner.

'Yes,' replied the Squire; 'she is riding with Jack Denham.'

'She rides very frequently with Captain Denham,' returned Lady Francis quietly; but that quiet tone of hers was only with difficulty assumed. Lady Fanny was not a busybody, and she greatly disliked the business upon which she was now engaged.

'She does,' assented the Squire. 'I think she likes him. I am glad of it, for he is a thoroughly good fellow, and, as you know, an old friend of mine.'

'He is a thoroughly good fellow?' she returned, this time so markedly, that the Squire became aware that there was something more in the matter than appeared upon the surface.

He glanced sharply at her, much surprised.

'Certainly; certainly, I should say,' he replied quickly.

'Ah,' she murmured thoughtfully, 'then I have been mistaken.'

'Mistaken, Fanny!' repeated the Squire, more surprised than ever. 'In what way, my dear?'

Lady Francis did not answer this direct question, but her eyes met the Squire's, and there was a grave, questioning expression in them.

'Explain yourself, Fanny. What is wrong?' he continued anxiously.

'Nothing, I hope,' she replied quietly, and with assumed carelessness. 'Only, I wondered if you had noticed what is going on. I wondered whether you liked the idea. You and I are old friends, Colonel Vernon. I have been, in a small way, responsible. I have acted an elder sister's—a chaperon's—part so

often. She has kept nothing from me — save this. You and I understand each other, or, at least, I believed so. I thought your wishes as to her future were the same as'—Lady Fanny hesitated—'mine,' she added, after a pause, 'and I wondered whether you had changed your mind as to it; that is all.'

'You mean to say that you think that — that there is something — going on between Dolly and Captain Denham?' suggested the Squire, after a long pause, and in an unnaturally quiet tone of voice.

'I am sure of it,' she replied gravely. 'And, what is more, I fear my warning has come—too late. I am afraid that Dolly really cares for him already.'

She was looking thoughtfully into the fire, and had not realised how the Squire's face had changed colour, how the muscles were twitching nervously in his forehead, or how painfully he was struggling to maintain a quiet, unconcerned, natural manner.

'My dear Fanny,' he said at last, in a voice that made her glance up quickly, 'I am very glad you came straight to me with this idea of yours. You have made a mistake. Your suggestion is quite impossible.'

'I am very glad to hear it,' she replied very quietly, and as if accepting the Squire's assertion.

'It is not generally known, Fanny, but I must tell you at once, that Captain Denham is a married man.'

'Married!' she repeated slowly, with her eyes fixed resolutely upon the fire.

'Yes, married,' returned the Squire. 'So now you see, my dear, how perfectly wrong you have been in your idea.'

'Of course I do!' she assented. 'If only I had known this before, how much anxiety it would have saved me.'

They were both terribly agitated, and both equally anxious that the other should be unaware of that mental agitation.

'I really ought to apologise for my stupidity,' she

continued, 'but we are such old friends that apologies are not necessary.'

'My dear Fanny, your extreme kindness to, and affection for, my little girl have placed me everlastingly in your debt. You are the one woman in the world who above all others I respect, like, and esteem, and knowing that, as you must know it, you need hardly talk about apologising to me!'

'Thank you,' returned Lady Fanny very quietly. 'And now, Colonel Vernon, I must be going,' she continued, in a conventional tone. 'I promised Mary to be at home by tea-time.'

'Must you really go?' he returned in the same tone. 'I am sorry; I hear Dolly's voice.'

'Thank you; but I really must,' she replied with decision.

'If you must, you must then,' and so saying he moved a step or two towards the door. 'I will tell Dolly that you are here, and at the same time order your carriage.' And Squire Vernon left the room.

In the hall he found his daughter; she was standing by the fire, warming her hands. Such slender, dainty little hands, in spite of the fact that just then they were tinted blue with cold. She turned a radiant, sparkling face towards him as he approached her, and it struck him painfully how unnaturally happy she was looking.

'Dads!' she exclaimed anxiously, a shadow passing quickly over her smiling face. 'Is anything wrong, dear? You look solemn. What is troubling you?'

'Nothing, my darling, nothing,' he murmured evasively 'Fanny is in the drawing-room. Go to her.'

'Fanny!' she exclaimed brightly; and, as is the way with youth, she instantly forgot the passing shadow. In another second she had vanished.

But alas! that shadow was no passing cloud, and her father knew it. It had been all very well to adopt a society tone, and to pretend that, since Jack Denham was married, there the matter ended. Of course that had been the only course open to them; but it was

hardly satisfying to either Lady Fanny or the Squire. The Squire knew only too well that Lady Francis Fairsmore was the last woman in the world to insinuate anything unless she had very good reason to do so.

'I am sure of it,' she had said. 'And, what is more, I fear my warning has come—too late. I am afraid that Dolly really cares for him already.'

Good heavens! could it be possible? That Dolly cared for him—for Jack Denham—for a married man? Could it be possible that any man could act like this,—towards his little Dolly? What could have put the idea in Lady Fanny's head?

One thing remained certain, before the evening was over, it must all be sifted to the bottom.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRST LEAF TURNED

'This life is all chequer'd with pleasures and woes,
That chase one another like waves of the deep.'
MOORE.

IT was nearly dark. Outside, the wind was madly whirling the quickly falling snow, now up, now down, in all directions. Not a cheerful evening, by any means, nor an evening likely to delight the heart of a foxhunter.

The change in the weather had come suddenly, and the open season which, so far, had favoured the Muddletonites, was brought, with its change, to an abrupt end. The present state of affairs promised to last for some little time.

The air was as keen as mustard, and the wind cutting, in spite of the snow—defying alike doors and windows, and seeming to find its way through bricks and mortar, forcing its unwelcome presence upon you in every corner and from every direction, whether you

would or no. But Dolly Vernon, apparently unconscious of discomfort, stood by the large west window in the Wyndeane drawing-room, and smiled serenely at the bleak, comfortless scene without.

She had changed her habit for a warmly-tinted velvet dress, and she stood holding back one of the Oriental curtains, which as yet remained undrawn. Her eyes were fixed upon the ever-falling snow-flakes; but she hardly knew that it was snowing, so absent-minded was she, as she stood smiling there.

She was in a humour to smile at anything or everything that chance or providence might bring her. Weather! hunting! What were they to her? She was thoroughly happy, and at peace with all the world. So happy, that it seemed to her, just then, that nothing could ever touch or mar that happiness again. As yet, she had all a very young girl's belief in the living present, and forgetfulnss of past and future—all that vast capacity for utter enjoyment which belongs to childhood only.

Suddenly, as she stood there, she buried her face against the curtain, as if to shut out a scene that dazzled her by its very brightness. After that, for a long time, she continued to stand dreaming there—her face resting against the curtain, and her mind so absorbed in thought that she never noticed the ever-deepening darkness. She quite started when she became aware of a presence hovering near her.

It was only John, who, having brought in the lamps, and drawn all the other curtains, was quietly making a slight protest against the little divergence from his usual round of duty, which his young mistress was causing by standing between the still undrawn curtains of that large west window. He unobtrusively tidied the papers on the top of the pianoforte near her, and, in so doing, at last attracted her attention.

She started perceptibly, turned her head, realised the situation, and walked quickly away towards the fireplace.

John drew the curtains over the west window, shutting

out the last glimpse of the dreary night without, and then silently left the room.

As to his mistress, she stood by the fire, very much as she had stood by the window, still dreaming—still thinking what a sweet thing it was to be young, and to love, and live.

And it was thus, with her face lit up by the divine light of a perfect love, that Squire Vernon found her, when he entered the room a few minutes later on. As he stood beside her, she raised her face and looked at him, and he could not help seeing the soft, tender light in her dark grey eyes. Then a horrible, dreadful idea gained material force.

For a second or two he hesitated, then he took a step forward, and placed his hand under her little rounded chin, gently raised her face, and looked down earnestly and questioningly into it. Her eyes met his unflinchingly, tenderly, and trustfully, as they were ever wont to do.

'Dads, darling,' she said softly, 'I have something to tell you.'

'Yes, Dolly?' he returned nervously.

'I did not ask him whether I might tell you yet or not, Dads,' she continued simply; 'but, although it is a secret, I am not going to keep it any longer from you—'

'My little Dolly,' he interrupted gravely, 'I do not know what you are talking about, or of whom you are speaking, but I wish to force no confidences.'

'No, dear Dads; this is no confidence. It is something—about me—which you must know,' she replied, evidently surprised.

'Very well, Dolly. But before you tell me your story I—I have one of my own to tell you. Sit down, little one.'

The Squire was terribly troubled, terribly nervous; but he drew Dolly down on to a sofa near them, and, with her hand in his, continued very quietly,—

'I also am going to tell you a secret, Dolly. I have been thinking that since Jack Denham is such a frequent

guest here, it is only right that you should know his history.'

Dolly suddenly became crimson. This mystery which hung over Jack! Was her father going to explain it?

The Squire looked down, and caught sight of two great wistful eyes looking anxiously into his own. It was quite plain that some deep and powerful emotion was working within his young daughter's breast; and her likeness to her mother at that moment struck him for the first time, and touched him as he had not been touched for years.

The Squire became conscious that he had opened his campaign about as badly as he well could have done; but it was hard, so very hard, this part which he found himself obliged to play—a matter which required such delicate and careful handling; and, careful as he might be, he felt deeply that he failed sadly in that delicacy of touch which was just then so greatly needed.

He knew for a certainty now that Lady Francis had been only too wise in her observations, and that Dolly's fancy—he prayed it might be no deeper feeling—had been caught by this man. And all the bitter anger which rose in his heart against Jack Denham gave way, for the time being, to the overpowering sorrow which he felt for Dolly. He wished to be perfectly open with her, and yet to let her receive no unnecessary shock—in fact, to make the best way possible to be made out of an extremely bad business.

He must tell her himself; save her any humiliation which he possibly could save her. His must be the hand which first overthrows his child's belief in the goodness of her fellow-creatures. Had he guarded and trained her so carefully only to have to tell her already that the world is a very evil place, owing to the people in it? Must he show her it now at its very worst? Undeniably, but this was, indeed, a terrible business,—so terrible, that the Squire gave a faint groan.

Dolly looked so very like her mother, and what if she inherited her mother's nature—if passing fancies were impossibilities to her? If this love, which must be

down-trodden and cast away from her at once, was the one only love of her life? But surely this could not be! Surely her love would turn to hate. Probably, reasonably, it might do so; but where one love has turned to hate, does another honest, true, good love ever follow in its footsteps?

Meanwhile, Dolly's heart was torn with conflicting emotions; she longed to hear the truth as to this mystery of Jack's, yet never even dreaming of its grave import, her honourable mind revolted against hearing it thus surreptitiously. She felt bound to refuse to let her father tell her anything about it.

'Dads,' she whispered at last, 'please do not tell me Jack's history. I do not wish to hear anything about it.'

'Why not, Dolly?' asked the Squire, much surprised by this request.

'Because he does not wish me to know about it just yet,' she replied softly.

'Does he not?' exclaimed her father, horror-stricken by this all-condemning proof of Captain Denham's baseness. 'I cannot help that, Dolly. I think it better to tell you that—that—he is a married man.'

The Squire did not look at Dolly as he spoke; and, having spoken, he very abruptly rose and left the room.

Some people say that women have more tact and are more sympathetic than men; but if those people will pardon me, I doubt it. There are many sorrows which are only endurable in solitude, and men are not given to probing an open wound.

Dolly sat quite quietly where her father left her, her large eyes fixed upon the fire, and her face expressionless. What she was thinking of she herself knew. This trouble had come upon her so suddenly, that at present she could not realise it. Stunned, luckily for her, by the magnitude of it, she just then was incapable of thinking, or of feeling pain.

CHAPTER XI.

'NEVER AGAIN.'

'But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me.'—TENNYSON.

'WHO is there?'

'It is I, Dads. May I come in?'

'One moment. Yes, all right, come in!'

This permission given, Dolly turned the handle of her father's dressing-room door, and entered the room.

She was dressed for dinner in some sort of clinging white material; her manner was exceedingly quiet, and her step firm and dignified. There was nothing about her to show that anything had happened to distress or annoy her, except her face; and, calm as the expression on it was, there was a world of trouble written beneath its excessive pallor, and it had altered strangely since a few short hours ago.

The Squire, with a hair-brush suspended mid-air in each hand, looked at the tall, slender girl who stood before him, in a troubled, uneasy way. He knew that something was going to be said which would pain them both; some explanation going to be given, which perhaps was necessary, but which he had hoped would not have been necessary. The necessity for it proved that things were very serious.

He had been fondly hoping that, even if there had been a flirtation, Dolly's heart had not been deeply involved in it, and that perhaps it would only draw her the nearer to George in the end, showing her as it would, by comparison, how upright and honest George was, and how different to some other men.

Of course the thought of Captain Denham's behaviour was maddening. The idea that he had ventured to try and get up a flirtation with Dolly—Dolly, who was so young, so good, so different to the everyday young women of the present day! Unendurable; but surely there the matter ended.

No. This had all been idle dreaming; her face told him that the moment she entered his room.

'I want to have a little talk with you before dinner to-night alone,' she began quietly. As she spoke, she rested her hand on the back of a chair as if for support, but she looked the Squire full in the face, and her voice was calm and composed.

'Yes, my pet,' he replied gently.

'It will not be a pleasant talk, Dads, for either of us; but it is quite imperative that we should thoroughly understand each other.'

'Certainly, darling. Sit down, Dolly. You look as white as a ghost.'

'It is nothing, I prefer standing. Dads, dear, I want to tell you that there has been a very dreadful misunderstanding. I have made a very great mistake about something. I did not know that Jack—was married, and, and we have been—Oh, Dads, I cannot say any more; only this, I have learnt to care for him far more than I ought—and it is quite my own fault!'

'That I will swear it is not!' exclaimed the Squire wrathfully. 'D—n him!' he added, below his breath.

The last two words were very low, but Dolly heard them.

'Father,' she said very calmly, 'you must not say that.'

'But I do say it, Dolly! Not only behind his back, but will to his face, before the evening is over.'

'You must do nothing of the sort, please,' said Dolly gently.

'Why not?' demanded the Squire.

'Because I am not going to have Jack abused,' she replied gently.

'Bless my soul, Dolly, I am sure I beg your pardon for my language; but, as to Denham, who, from what I gather, has been acting the part of as big a—'

'Dads!' she exclaimed sharply. Then she moved a step nearer him, and continued in a hurried manner, 'I have been very wrong, very wicked. I loved him, but I did not know—how could I know?'

She sat down wearily in the chair upon which she had been leaning, and glanced protestingly up into her father's face.

'My darling, how could you know, unless he told you? How could you possibly imagine that any man could act such a— Well, well, do not look at me like that! He has behaved atrociously; you cannot wish to deny it?'

'He has done very wrong,' she assented quietly.

'And I would have trusted Jack Denham,—I have trusted him for years implicitly,' exclaimed the Squire bitterly.

'Ah, so did I!' murmured Dolly pitifully.

'But it was my fault, in a great measure,' she continued. 'Do not lay all the blame on Jack's shoulders. He is very easily influenced, dreadfully weak and impressionable. That he should have wished to flirt with me was only natural, perhaps; but—'

Captain Denham's teaching! Down in his heart, the Squire thanked him for it!

'It was not natural. It was disgraceful,' he exclaimed.

'It was wrong,' she returned quietly. 'But I was wrong also, very wrong. Realising, as I did, that there was something the matter, I ought to have behaved very differently. But, knowing he was a gentleman—'

'Gentleman!' groaned the Squire.

'I believed him to be one,' said Dolly.

'And very nicely he has repaid us for our belief, Dolly. My little girl, I am truly and dreadfully distressed that this humiliation—' the Squire paused, and glanced for a moment at Dolly—'that, I mean, this should have happened. But it is over, darling, do not let it trouble you too much; it, I repeat, was no fault of yours.'

'It is dreadful, Dads, dreadful!' she whispered, glancing up at him.

'He shall know my opinion about it, Dolly; depend upon that,' returned her father, somewhat drily.

'My dear Dads, there must be no scene! The least said, the soonest mended' she said gently.

'It can never be mended, Dolly. Nothing can mend it,' replied the Squire sternly.

'Never!' she assented sadly. 'I know that. It will hang over me—'

'Not you, my pet!' he murmured soothingly.

'Yes, certainly over me,' she continued quietly. 'Dads, if you can still trust me, I ask you to prove your love for me by leaving the matter in my hands. It will be best so.'

The Squire said nothing in reply to this request. He glanced down at the white, troubled face of his favourite child, and felt that he could not deny himself the satisfaction of a *tête-à-tête* with Captain Denham. But was not Dolly right? Was this not the least compromising manner of breaking this unpleasant matter? Did it not, in a way, lessen the unpleasantness of it for Dolly, that she should quietly put an end to it in her own way? And that Dolly's way would be all it should be—that it was certain to be a good way—the Squire never for a moment doubted. He had the very highest opinion of his young daughter's judgment. That she had a large fund of good common-sense he was well aware of. After all, seemingly, the matter was only a skin-deep affair on her part. Well, women sometimes understand what is best in a difficult affair of this kind, far better than men do. She should have it as she wished.

'Very well, Dolly; on the understanding that he goes away to-morrow, realising that he never enters my house again, I will do as you wish,—for your sake,' he replied gravely.

'Thank you, Dads. You shall never regret it,' she replied quietly.

'I know that I can trust you, Dolly, to do and say what is right.'

'Thank you, dear Dads, for that! After what has happened, I feared I might have lost your confidence.'

'Never, child,' he returned softly, meeting the glance of her steadfast grey eyes as he spoke. 'Never that! I can trust my little daughter implicitly, thank God! But

I am glad you told me all about it, Dolly; it is more like your own old self.'

But, as he spoke, something in the expression on her face sent a sudden chill deep down into the Squire's heart. A terrible conviction had stolen over him that she would never be her own old self again!

CHAPTER XII.

'I AM NO FIT GUARDIAN FOR MY LITTLE GIRL.'

'An't please your honour,' quoth the peasant:
'This same desert is not so pleasant.'—POPE.

VERY difficult did Squire Vernon find it, that same evening, to reconcile the longing which was burning within him to speak his mind to Captain Denham, with his promise to his daughter.

If, during dinner-time, a feeling of regret that he had given that promise rose once in his mind, it rose there a hundred times. And then, when Dolly left the two men to themselves, he found the temptation to break his promise almost more than he could bear. To have to sit quietly there, and appear to be on moderately good terms with this man, was a part that the Squire found it extremely hard to play; indeed, so poorly did he succeed in it, that Captain Denham soon began to find that, excellent as was the state of the Squire's cellar, it hardly compensated for the dulness and stiffness of the Squire.

Jack Denham glanced several times at his old comrade, and wondered greatly what was ailing him. He did not inquire, however: something in Colonel Vernon's manner prevented him from asking any questions. He began to feel uneasy; the Squire's humour affected him, and his tongue, which as a rule could keep a table going, grew less and less versatile.

A heavy sense of oppression invaded the atmosphere

in the Wyndeane dining-room. Both men wished heartily that they could leave the room; but the Squire felt he must not do so, and of course his guest was obliged to do as he did.

Captain Denham's eyes wandered listlessly round the carved oak walls, almost black with age; and from the walls to the pictures which hung round them, until they rested on the last addition to them—a living likeness of the Squire's second daughter, fresh from Millais' hands.

'Have another cigarette, Denham?' inquired the Squire sharply, ere they had rested there for many seconds.

'Thanks—no,' replied that gentleman, slightly startled by the Squire's tone.

'Then perhaps you would like to join Vera in the drawing-room. I have some business to see to which will detain me for half-an-hour or so.'

'All right!' assented Captain Denham, trying not to appear quite as well pleased as he was feeling at this turn in the state of affairs; and, tossing off some old brown sherry which was in his glass, he got up and sauntered out of the room.

His mind was somewhat uneasy about this sudden change in the Squire's manner, and his conscience pricked him as to its possible cause. Little thinking, however, how much Squire Vernon really knew, he adopted an air of nonchalance, and tried to console himself with the thought that the Squire was most probably bothered about this business matter which he had just mentioned.

Left alone, the Squire sat for some time, just where Captain Denham left him. He was thinking deeply, and a heavy shadow obliterated the genial, kind expression which was habitual on his face.

After a time he rose, and, going to one of the windows, drew aside the curtains, and threw open the window-sash.

As he did so, a keen blast of frosty air and a flood of dazzling moonlight rushed into the room. The snow had ceased to fall, and a hard frost had set in in sober earnest. The sky was all bespangled with its many million stars; and the freshly-fallen snow glistened with a weird, un-

natural brilliancy. Somehow the Squire's glance roved upwards; a sense of bitter isolation had stolen over him. That loss of long ago, which was so ever-present, fell upon him with terrible force to-night, and he murmured wearily to himself,—'If she had lived, all this would have been saved her. I am no fit guardian for your little girl, Nina.'

'Hallo, Squire! Is that you? Cheerful evening, isn't it? I've been round by Brixley, and have only just returned. Can you give me something to eat?'

The Squire started, and his eyes fell upon George, who was standing on the snow-covered garden path, just outside the window. And, as his eyes rested upon that tall, manly figure, in its rough shooting-coat, and ancient, but excellently well-made breeches and gaiters, the Squire's face brightened for the first time that evening.

An atmosphere of warmth and goodwill seemed to enter the room as George Ventnor stepped into it, held out his rather large and very sunburnt hand, and grasped the Squire's.

'That I can, George. Ring the bell,' was the hearty reply.

And as Squire Vernon sat talking to the young man, who had thus thrust his company upon him, a sense of comfort stole into his heart, bearing away with it part of his troubles. It seemed to him as if things must work round for the best in the end; as if George's sunny presence must clear away the cobwebs which had surrounded Dolly. For so it is, that so infectious is the congeniality of some natures, that in spite of every adverse cloud which may be hanging over us, all our mountains seem to turn into the proverbial mole-hills when we are with them.

CHAPTER XIII.

VERA'S VERDICT.

'Oh, fear not in a world like this,
And thou shalt know, ere long,
Know how sublime a thing it is,
To suffer, and be strong.'—LONGFELLOW.

WHEN she left the dining-room, Dolly went straight into the drawing-room, mechanically drew a chair close to the fire, and sat down in it.

There she sat, doing nothing; and if it is possible to think of nothing—thinking of nothing.

When Price brought in the coffee, his entrance only partially disturbed her out of the lethargic state into which she had fallen; she simply shook her head when he offered it to her, without taking her eyes away from the fire, on which they were fixed somewhat vacantly.

At present, she felt very little grief. Pain and sorrow were ready waiting to receive her in a close embrace; but as yet her trouble was new to her, and there was still that necessity for action which, while it lasted, robbed it of half its sting.

She felt stunned, crushed, and very tired; but there was no very acute suffering for her just then; only a deep sense of humiliation, and a heavy assurance that a dreadful misfortune had overtaken her, and that much trouble was in store for her in the future—in that future into which she dare not trust herself to glance, until this terrible state of affairs which existed between Jack Denham and herself was at an end.

Jack Denham opened the door so quietly when he entered that she did not hear him. He stole across the room, until he stood close behind her chair. For a few seconds he looked at her in silence; and then he knelt down beside her, and laid his cheek against the many-coloured piece of Indian embroidery on which her shapely little head and its mass of soft auburn hair was resting.

'Jack,' she exclaimed, starting up into a rigidly, upright position, 'oh, Jack, why did you not tell me the truth? What have I done to make you think—so badly of me? How could you treat me like this?'

Captain Denham's face gradually assumed a grey, unnatural hue; he also started up, conscious-stricken, miserable, utterly ashamed of himself—he could not utter a word.

'I know everything now,' she continued, speaking quietly again. 'I know why you could not ask me to marry you—just yet—a good reason you had, in truth, Jack!'

'Spare me, Dolly, brute that I am; spare me, if you can. I loved you!—I loved you!'

The appeal was passionate; it was more—it was the appeal of a terribly weak man; and Dolly, who admired strength of character and a strict sense of honour in her fellow-creatures, was, strangely enough, inexpressibly touched by Jack Denham's weakness. It had been so with her from the first. She forgave him for the failing which, above all other failings, was distasteful to her nature; indeed, this very failing seemed to draw her nearer to him, and what she abhorred in others had been the very source of her love for him. She looked steadily away from him as she replied coldly,—

'A strange way yours of showing your love and respect for people.'

'Although I deserve it, and more, for pity's sake do not speak to me like that! Respect you? Heaven knows, I respect the very ground you tread upon.'

'Perhaps you do, in your way,' she returned gently, 'but you have made me do such a wicked thing, that all my life will never be long enough for me to forget it in, or forgive myself for it.'

'Oh, Dolly, can you ever forgive me?' he moaned pitifully.

'Hush!' she replied, quietly; 'it is not for me to forgive—I forgive you.'

'My angel!' he whispered softly, and there was something in his voice which sounded like tears.

'I am no angel,' she replied, and then looked up, and

her glance met his, steadily, resolutely; 'and I am not yours.'

Her face turned rather white after she had said that. It was the first outward sign of emotion which she had displayed. That glance at the handsome face she loved had tried her more than she had believed possible under the existing circumstances. Alas! the armour in which she had wrapped her heart was not invulnerable; in a moment Jack Denham realised it. Dolly loved him—loved him even now.

'Would to Heaven you were!' he exclaimed, once again dropping on to his knees beside her. 'Oh, Dolly! my own lost darling! would to Heaven you were!'

And then suddenly his dark head, with its closely-cropped, glossy, black hair, bowed down, and in a passion of grief and love he buried his face against the soft white material of her dress.

For one horror-stricken moment she glanced down at him. She loved him, wicked as it was, she loved him, loved him so far too well.

Then she started up, pushing away her chair, and casting him from her as if he was some abhorrent thing, which indeed he was to her truer, better nature.

'You have done enough to grieve and hurt me, Jack, without this! You surely do not wish to add to my humiliation, do you?'

'Forgive me,' he pleaded, 'I hardly know what I do or say! I love you so, and I must lose you!'

'There is one thing you must not say, Jack, and that is, that you love me,' she replied sharply.

'Is there so much difference between the fact and the acknowledgment of it?' he inquired wearedly.

'Just this, that you can help the one and you cannot help the other,' was the quiet answer. 'And now, Jack, sit down and tell me everything. I want to know your story.'

'You want to know my story?' he repeated, in a rather surprised way. 'Do you really care to hear what my story is?'

'Yes, I should like to hear it,' she replied quietly.

That he had a story she realised perfectly, and she wished to know it—to judge for herself whether this clay idol of hers was wholly bad at heart, or rendered so by a fate which had been too strong for him.

Now, deeply-rooted as Dolly's love had been, had the former been the case, then and there it would have changed to loathing. Alas! for her, she almost unconsciously gave her mental verdict the other way, after gleaning what she could out of Jack Denham's past.

'Well!' she said quietly, after a long silence.

'I cannot tell you my story, Dolly,' he replied gently but firmly, and with decision.

She glanced up at him, surprised by his answer. Even now, with intense shame, she realised that this change in his manner had sent a strange thrill of pleasure right down to her heart. For the first time she realised that he had another side to his character—in fact, that when not sorely tempted to be bad, he was not a very bad man. Instinctively she realised that if he had not been married, and had married her, that he would have made her a good husband, and never done anything dishonourable or blamable from that day forth.

A faint tinge of colour came into her cheeks.

'Tell me what you care, then,' she replied quietly.

'I have been married nearly five years. She is not a lady,' he said shortly.

'And you have ceased to love her in consequence, poor thing,' she returned quickly, her compassion for a fellow-sufferer rushing to the fore.

'I never loved her,' was the short reply.

'Then why did you marry her?' she inquired with surprise.

Captain Denham's face was turned away from her; he made no reply.

A dull red came slowly into Dolly's cheeks, and she gazed into the fire in a fixed hard way.

'For Heaven's sake do not look like that!' he exclaimed imploringly. 'I cannot bear it.'

'You seem to "bear" anything unpleasant very badly,' was the cold answer. For the first time in her life her

heart was as cold and hard as ice. 'You must be a comfort to your wife!' she continued drily, after a long pause. 'However, no doubt, she hates you. How I should hate you if I were her!'

This remark goaded Dolly's erring admirer to madness.

'She doesn't hate me,' he returned in a hard voice.

Instantly Dolly turned and looked at him, her manner softening.

'Does she love you, Jack?' she asked softly.

'She does; worse luck,' was the gloomy return.

'And you are unkind to her?'

'I hope not. I allow her every penny I can spare,' he replied gravely.

'Money is nothing,' she returned scornfully. 'Do you love me?' she added in a softer tone, after a few seconds' meditation. 'Really and truly, I mean, very much indeed?'

For a few seconds Captain Denham stared at her in utter astonishment, and then he exclaimed passionately,—

'Love you, Dolly! Love you!'

'Well, well,' she murmured soothingly. 'Are you willing to prove it? Willing to show me that you are really sorry for what you have done?'

'Indeed I am,' he said earnestly.

'You can only do it in one way, Jack. You say your wife loved you; that she loves you still. Be good to her, Jack, for my sake. Make her life all that you would have wished mine to be had I been in her place. Jack, if you will promise to do this, then I can forgive you, and myself—and only then can I ever forgive myself.'

'I will do it,' he replied solemnly. 'Since you wish it!'

'And remember, Jack, that one's duty towards one's wife—towards women—does not vary much, whether a lady or a lady's maid—'

'How did you know that?' he inquired sharply.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, with a little quiver in her voice. 'I did not know. Never mind, Jack! Do not spoil three lives. At anyrate, let hers be happy.'

'I will, Dolly,' he assured her, all that was best in him brought out by her; and there was a best about Jack

Denham. Dolly had been right in her estimation of him when she had thought, after the fashion of an Irishman, that he would have been a good man if he had not happened to be a bad one. She looked up at him now, and bestowed a sad little smile upon him.

'You must go to-morrow, early of course, and, equally of course, we must meet no more; but as long as you go on honourably I shall think kindly of you in spite of everything,' she said very gravely.

'God bless you, Dolly,' he whispered brokenly.

And then, without offering him any adieu, she quietly left the room and stole away upstairs.

CHAPTER XIV.

NOT AN ANGEL.

'Thou hast call'd me thy angel, in moments of bliss,
And thy angel I'll be, 'mid the horrors of this,
Thro' the furnace, unshrinking, thy steps to pursue,
And shield thee, and save thee,—or perish there too.'

MOORE.

DOLLY was so worn out that night that when she went to bed she slept—a troubled, uneasy sleep, out of which she kept starting, and even crying out aloud.

Starting up and waking to become conscious of the fact that a dead, oppressive weight was resting on her; that something very serious had gone wrong. Then would follow an hour or so during which she tossed and tumbled about in bed, until her head was hot and throbbing, and her brain seemed to be positively on fire; and then at last, from sheer physical exhaustion, she would fall once more into a half-restless, half-heavy, wholly troubled sleep.

And so on until morning, when the sun began to shine gloriously upon the frost-bound snow without, and she roused thoroughly at last to realise that to-day Jack Denham must leave Wyndeane never to return there,

and that she had said adieu to Love and Hope and Peace for ever.

She had as yet only dimly realised the pain which was in store for her; that heavier trouble which was coming in a long, empty future. She knew that it was hanging over her; that it was hovering overhead, coming ever nearer; but she dare not trust her mind to rest upon it just then. She knew that she would need all her strength, all her nerve, to keep herself calm and cool to-day. A dreadful trial was before her. But dreadful as it is to say adieu to all we love in life, it is far less terrible than the isolation which must follow when that adieu is said.

At breakfast-time she sat very quietly at the head of her father's table—making tea, pouring out coffee, and generally attending to her duties as mistress of the house. Her manner was perhaps a little stiff, but otherwise ailed nothing; and when at last she gathered up her letters and departed on her little round of household duties, Jack Denham's eyes followed her wistfully, and a belief that she did not care two straws about him came over him, and brought with it a feeling which was wrought of a strange mixture of pain and thankfulness.

Extremely blamable as was this man, whom Squire Vernon, very justly, had called a scoundrel, he possessed a very kind heart, and if, by sorrow and repentance, he could now have undone the wrong he had done the girl he loved, he would have given his very life to do it. But the matter was now out of his keeping; and all that there remained for him to do was to tell the Squire that he was called unexpectedly away, and must leave Wyndeane that morning.

'Very well!' the Squire returned shortly, breaking abruptly in upon these excuses.

Captain Denham started. The truth flashed suddenly upon him—that Dolly's father knew all about it. And yet, could he know all? or had he only a suspicion? And if he knew, why did he not speak? In a conscious-striken way, Jack Denham began to wonder how much the Squire knew—that he did not know how far matters had really gone, was, he rightly judged, a certainty.

As to the Squire's speaking, Captain Denham had not long to wait before he did so.

'Denham,' he said presently, with a forced, unnatural calmness, 'I do not know what you may think of your conduct, but perhaps you can form some idea of my opinion of you.' Then suddenly, his calmness breaking down, he threw down the newspaper which he had been pretending to read, and exclaiming, 'There; save me your snivelling excuses! Nothing can excuse your conduct one iota!' he hurriedly left the room.

To say that Captain Denham felt uncomfortable, as he stood alone by the dining-room fire, after the Squire's departure, is putting the matter very mildly indeed. Half an hour would have to elapse before the dogcart, which was to convey him to Little Muddleton Station, was at all likely to come to the door. What in the world was he to do with himself? How could he best keep out of the Squire's and Dolly's way? He knew that to attempt to say anything in the way of apology would only be adding insult to injury. The Squire had been very just in remarking that nothing could excuse his conduct. The situation in which he found himself was one which the most casual, hardened sinner could not possibly have enjoyed; and to Jack Denham, who, although a sinner, was by no means a hardened or indifferent one, was full of acute misery and discomfort.

Then suddenly, out of a mist of darkness, a ray of light entered the room, and Dolly Vernon stood before him.

For years afterwards Jack Denham saw her as he saw her then. The sun was shining in at one of the long old-fashioned windows, and its rays fell upon and wandered over her hair, burnishing it into a mass of floating gold; her tall, slender, stately figure stood there so quietly that it seemed almost lifeless; but the sunshine that lit up her hair fell also upon her pale, beautiful face, and rested in her large, serious eyes, until it idealised its beauty so strangely, that Jack found himself wondering whether a human being or an angel stood there looking at him.

But there was a very human expression in those large dark eyes, and the small white hand which she held out to him was warm and full of vitality.

He did not speak; but as his fingers closed over hers, and held them closely, he seemed to gather from their contact a touch of her strength of purpose, and a sense of her goodness and pureness came home to him.

'Good-bye, Jack,' she said quietly. 'We have made a terrible mess of things; but do not be too down-hearted about it. It is over and done with now, and there is no use in dwelling upon the past.'

He murmured something so low that she could not hear him; and there followed a short silence, before he found confidence to speak.

'Dolly, I shall do what you wish,' he said solemnly. 'You may be sure of that. Emily shall be the gainer by this miserable business. And you—I shall hope and pray that in some other man's love you will learn to forget all about me, and to forgive me. May he be a good man—a man who will make your life bright and happy!'

And then he released her hand, and turned abruptly away from her. For her sake he did wish it at that moment; but the pain of the thought of it was almost unendurable.

'Jack,' she returned gently, 'perhaps it will help you; perhaps you will feel more fully the obligation you are under to me, and it will help you to lead as good a life —make—her as happy as I would wish, if I tell you that I shall never marry. That would only be doing another wrong to some one else, in my opinion.'

No suspicion of the fact that she still cared for him came to him; that, to a woman like Dolly, would of course be out of the question; but that after having once done so, she would refuse to marry any other man he felt was a certainty.

'Come what may in the future, Dolly, I shall never feel that the obligation I am under to you is at an end, you must marry, dear. You will see that by-and-by,' he returned very humbly. Then suddenly—'Oh, my angel! my little angel! Good-bye.'

'No! no!' she exclaimed sharply. 'Do not call me that! I am very far from being an angel; and if one believed old Mr Summers' doctrine, I never shall be one after this. Good-bye.'

Price entered the room at that moment to inform Captain Denham that the dogcart was waiting at the door.

And so they parted; Dolly to rush away through one door up to her own room, and Captain Denham following the old butler through another, and out of the house, where for years he had been an honoured and welcome guest, and from which he was now departing for ever, disgraced and banished.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS GRAHAM.

'All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
A partial evil, universal good.'—POPE.

ON the afternoon of the day following his departure from Wyndeane, Captain Denham stood upon the doorstep of No. 7 Asham Street, South Kensington.

He had spent a truly miserable thirty hours of it since last we saw him; for he was a gentleman at heart, and the fact that he had done a thoroughly base and dishonourable thing troubled him deeply. Too weak to resist what to him had been a terrible temptation, more weak than actually bad, his conduct caused him as much regret and as deep a sense of shame as it would have caused many a far better man; and yet mixed with it, in spite of that deep sense of wrong-doing, the knowledge that Dolly was lost to him for ever, and that he must never cross her path again, had made those hours almost unendurable.

Weak, fickle, and a flirt by nature, he had never known,

until a few days ago, that there existed such a thing as this love which he had now given heart and soul to Dolly Vernon. And in spite of all the regret and sorrow and shame which he felt, the knowledge that she never could be his, could not but add tenfold to the love which such a man as he could give.

It was not a noble, not by any means a 'divine,' love that he bestowed upon her, but he loved her very sincerely in his own way—loved her more than he would ever love another human being; loved her as much as it was in his nature to love any woman, passionately and excessively, not after the matter of a saint, but of a slave; loved her enough to make him very strong just then in his resolution never to add one little trouble to the list of those he had already brought her, and to make him resolve to carry out her wishes.

And so it was that he stood upon the doorstep of No. 7 Asham Street, feeling too depressed and shaken by recent events to care very much for the awkwardness of his present situation, or the scene which he knew, in all human probability, must follow it.

'Mrs Graham in?' he inquired of the rather supercilious-looking parlour-maid, who suddenly threw open the door.

'I do not know, sir. I will inquire.'

'You need not do so,' replied he, as he strode in and began to cross the hall towards the stairs.

'Your name, sir?'

'Oh—er—my name? Thanks. I'll announce myself.'

'Mrs Graham is not at home to visitors to-day, sir. She is in the drawing-room, and is engaged,' explained the woman, resolutely taking up her position at the foot of the staircase. She had ceased to be supercilious, and had become severe.

'Thank you. But I happen to be Mr Graham, you see,' he returned quietly.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' murmured Mrs Graham's parlour maid, as she hastily moved aside.

'Not at all! only doing as you were ordered!' he re-

plied good-humouredly, and then slowly began to mount the stairs.

Mary Judson had only lived in the quiet house in Asham Street for a few months, and although she had heard that there was a Mr Graham, she had only half believed in him. She hurried off, as soon as he had disappeared, to inform the cook of the unexpected arrival of this good-looking officer, with his fine figure and his handsome face; and cook, who had been there for more than a year, was also much surprised. She also had so far only heard vague rumours of his existence.

Meanwhile Captain Denham, *alias* Mr Graham, mounted the stairs and paused before a door upon the first landing; he had evidently roused himself to a consciousness of the strangeness of his position, for he stopped outside that door, and hesitated what to do next. He had meant to enter unannounced, but, changing his mind, he knocked rather nervously, and waited outside the door.

'Come in.' The voice which said it was not an unpleasant one, although just then its tone was a trifle sharp and expressive of impatience.

Jack Denham opened the door, and entered. It was apparent that the speaker was in the little inner room, out of sight. He walked slowly towards it, feeling very, very nervous.

'I thought I told you, Mary, that you must never knock at the doors of the sitting-rooms,' remarked Mrs Graham, or, more correctly speaking, Mrs John Denham, from her position near a window in the distance.

Her back was turned towards the room, and she did not look round, but continued looking at a book which was on a table before which she sat. Her elbows were resting on the table, her face half hidden in her hands, and the back of her somewhat graceful, rounded figure was all that Jack Denham could see of her.

'It is I, not Mary,' he said at last, awkwardly.

'Jack!' she exclaimed, starting up and facing him. Her face was scarlet with surprise—not a plain face, by any means, nor did it indicate her class, being small and

far more refined than many a lady's. She was rather below the average height, and on the whole a pretty woman; and by the expression upon her face, it was very evident that she loved the man who stood before her, in spite of all the trouble he had brought her from the first hour they had met.

'Oh, Jack;' she repeated, and then, overpowered by some strong emotion, she sat down again, buried her face in her plump little hands, and began to cry bitterly.

There was an uneasy pause, during which she continued crying, and he watched her shaking figure nervously.

To do him justice, he neither felt impatient, angry, nor bored; only extremely uncomfortable, and sorry for her.

'I thought you were happy, Emmie,' he said at last, very gently, 'and that you agreed with me in thinking —that the arrangement which we made was for the best.'

'Oh yes, Jack! of course it is the only—I mean it is best for you; only, I am so very lonely here—and—' but here Mrs Denham broke down again; she was by no means burdened by a superabundance of pride, but it takes a very humble woman indeed to tell a man she misses him, when she knows he does not care two straws about her.

'But you have your friends?' he remarked soothingly, and as he said it he leant forward and laid his hand upon her arm. 'Don't cry; there's a good girl!'

With an effort she obeyed him, and suddenly taking his hand in both her own, kissed it passionately.

'I have no friends, dear,' she replied simply. 'You would not approve of the friends who would know me; and those you would approve of will have nothing to say to me. You see, Jack, no one really believes that I am married—or if they do believe it, believe also that I must have done something horribly wrong.'

There was no reproach in this last remark of hers, only a quiet statement of a plain fact, and a gentle submission to a hard fate. The extreme complaisance and gentleness of her manner would have irritated many

men, but it went straight to the right place in Captain Denham's heart.

'Emmie,' he said softly, 'I have been rather a brute to you—but will you try to forget it? I wish to—be a better husband to you, dear. I have been looking at things differently lately.'

'Jack, what do you mean?'

'I mean that I see no use—in keeping our marriage a secret—it is very unfair to you. I want you to come back to the regiment with me, Emmie,' he explained awkwardly.

She did not answer; but burying her face against his shoulder, began to cry again.

'There, Em! Do not cry, dear! I have been a brute; but, if you can forgive me, things may be all right yet.'

'Not a brute, Jack! You see you are a gentleman!'

'Am I?' was the sarcastic reply. 'I very much doubt if any other man or woman in England would call me one.'

'Oh, hush, Jack,' was the troubled answer. 'I know that you are talking nonsense, dear. Oh, Jack, thank God for sending you back to me—at last!' she added passionately. As she spoke she put up her hand and gently stroked his face;—it was the hand which had his wedding-ring upon it.

For a second or two he looked down rather oddly into her upraised face; and then quite suddenly he knelt down beside her, and with his face buried against her shoulder, poured sentence after sentence of trouble into her ears.

How much he revealed to her he himself afterwards never even suspected; but a strong bond of sympathy and affection was sealed between them before those revelations were over.

It was very terrible to her, this unexpected outbreak of heart-broken grief; it pained her sorely to listen to some of the things he said, and it even frightened her a little; but it never crossed her mind for one moment that in some ways she had far more right to grieve than

he had, and her whole heart went out to him in his trouble, as she held him closely to her, and with her soft cheek laid against his, waited quite silently for it to cease.

Her conduct at that trying moment was very perfect, and this sweet sympathy which she gave him as his right, forgetting, as she did, all her own grievances, went far towards making the task which Dolly had set him endurable.

Then by-and-by he became himself again. Mary brought in the tea, and Emily poured it out, and waited upon him.

Emmie was very nice in her manner of doing it, and Captain Denham honestly endeavoured to give her his undivided attention. But, alas! it was impossible! Jack drank his tea and smiled at the little woman who was treating him so infinitely better than he deserved; but ever before his eyes there rose the picture of a tall, slender, stately figure, and a lovely piquant face; and he could not help comparing Emmie's plump thick fingers with two slender, blue-veined hands.

'What are you going to do to-night?' he inquired presently, in a rather absent manner.

'Do? How? What do you mean?' And as she spoke she looked up at him, and her eyes meeting his, she blushed rather prettily. Looking at her thus, it struck Captain Denham that she had improved immensely during the last year; and he smiled at her—really quite affectionately.

'I suppose you do not go out?' he replied doubtfully, and rather gauchely.

'No. How can I?'

'Well, you could to-night, you know,' he returned quickly. 'Shall we go to the theatre, Emmie? I rather want to see that new piece at the Gaiety.'

Her face was flushed with pleasure; and then suddenly something seemed to trouble her.

'I have no clothes!' she exclaimed regretfully.

'Why, Emmie, what do you mean? No clothes? Have I run you so short of cash, little woman?' he asked,

in a really concerned tone of voice. She blushed crimson, and hung her head.

'Well?' he interrogated at last, for she remained silent.

'I have been having lessons, Jack,' she explained, in a low, shy voice. 'And I have spent all I could spare upon them.'

'Why, I thought that you spoke—' he began; and then, colouring, checked himself abruptly. 'I mean, you are a very good little thing, Emmie! You could not have pleased me more.'

'Oh, Jack!'

'Now run away and put on your hat, and we will go out and see about this theatre;—and some clothes. Couldn't you buy what they call a skirt, and get one of those opera things?' he suggested, seeing a troubled look upon her face.

'Oh, yes, Jack, how clever of you!' and so saying, she ran away to put on her things.

She was very childish for her years, very simple in her ways, and by no means a clever woman; but she was rather pretty, had a pleasant voice, and there was nothing about her to rub against his sense of refinement in any way. It was extremely soothing, too, when he was conscious of having made a complete fool of himself, of having acted in a thoroughly ignoble manner, and of having recently been thought and called a blackguard, to hear himself spoken of as being good and clever. The titles which we do not deserve, like the things we do not possess, for many of us have an inexpressible charm; and Captain Denham smiled quite graciously upon his wife's departing figure.

Jack, like many another weak man, had kept his marriage a secret, simply because he dreaded public opinion. But now that he had bound himself to declare it, he was, on the whole, rather pleased than otherwise.

When left alone, he stood gazing absently into the fire; what he was thinking of he alone knew; but he was not very sorry that he had kept his promise to Dolly, while he waited there for his wife. He was just in that

state of mind which must be consoled somehow or other; and if he had not found that consolation in Asham Street, although not a drunkard, he would probably have drunk far more brandies and sodas at his club that afternoon than would have been quite prudent.

It was one of those times which are the turning-points in our lives, and it was certainly lucky for Jack Denham that, through Dolly's advice, he had turned the corner satisfactorily.

That he had turned it satisfactorily, there was no doubt.

That evening, when the theatre was over, he stood once again by the fire in the drawing-room of No. 7 Asham Street, and this time Emmie was standing near him. The skirt, which was black net, and the opera wrap, which was a very pretty one, had wrought a wonderful change in Mrs Denham's appearance; and what with that, and the happy expression which had settled upon her face, she made a picture by no means bad to look at.

At least so Jack Denham thought, as he looked gravely down at her.

'Emily,' he said quietly, 'how much I told you this afternoon I do not know. But I want to start straight with you this time, dear. I should never have come back to you to-day had not another woman—whom I love—sent me to you.'

'I know it, Jack,' she replied solemnly. 'God bless her for it!'

Then, after a long pause, she laid her hand caressingly upon his arm.

'Poor Jack,' she whispered softly.

But 'poor Jack,' considering what a sinner he was, was not to be pitied so very much after all just then; for hearing that sympathetic little whisper, he took her in his arms, held her very closely to him, and kissed her, not once, but many times, very much as if he liked it.

CHAPTER XVI.

'I THOUGHT IT WAS MY FATHER.'

'Here still is the smile, that no cloud can o'ercast,
And a heart and a hand all thy own to the last.'

MOORE.

HAVING followed Captain Denham to Asham Street, let us now return to the girl who sent him there.

How she spent the first few hours after his departure no one knew; they were spent in her own room, and the door of it was locked. That they had been very terrible to her, her father fully realised at luncheon time as she sat opposite him, talking to him upon the usual every-day topics, but with an expression in her eyes that left no doubt in the Squire's mind as to how she was taking the matter.

It was no girl who sat there opposite him. Not the Dolly of yesterday, who believed life to be all sunshine, and the world she lived in an earthly paradise; but a woman, a woman who had learnt that life is a serious, and by no means a purely satisfactory matter, and that, although we can learn to rise above it, and to exist in it, the lesson is in the first instance an extremely hard and hardening one.

To begin with, we are most of us in the garden of Eden; who can deny it? Not that childhood is always, if ever, the happy time that it has the credit of being. Children are too sensitive, too highly strung, to be really happy; they suffer so far more acutely than older people, and they are so invariably misunderstood. A romp in a sunny hayfield, a picnic in the woods, a thousand little pleasures, all giving acute enjoyment; a thoughtless word, an unjust accusation, a cold rebuke, all giving unendurable pain, and, for the hour, inconsolable misery. Sum it up, and childhood, even more than after-life, is ruined; and a world, that in itself is perfect, is rendered void and almost worthless by the multitude who, without any aim or object in their own lives, save to torment

their fellow-creatures, overcrowd it, and make it what it is. No; after all, most of us are never in the garden of Eden; we only ought to be. Childhood, and childhood alone, could be an almost perfect time in our existence; and those into whose hands the happiness of children is given, have certainly one of the very heaviest responsibilities, and one of the very best opportunities of doing good that is offered us in this life. How many of us let it, like all other duties, glide carelessly by? How many of us could render a strict account of every word said, every turn watched, every thought sympathised with? And yet what else is life given to us for? How many of us have any other opportunities of doing good in the world, save this?

But whether or no, childhood is an Eden or not, as far as happiness goes, it is at least an Eden in so far as knowledge goes; and it is when we first learn that there is a tree of knowledge in it that the whole course of existence changes for us. It is when we learn that if we only thought enough, we should all became lunatics; that the sufferings of others so far exceeds our own, that the only thing to do is to be thankful that our own are not greater than they are, that we begin to harden; and the hardening stage is the worst and most unendurable in our existence. After it is over, we become philosophers; and we no longer have the power to become 'exceedingly' anything. Earth can no longer be a paradise, and no longer be a hell.

Dolly was taking her first thorough lesson in the hardening business; and her father, realising it, knew that this unfortunate affair had gone very badly with her, and that she was suffering dreadfully.

'Shall we ride this afternoon?' he suggested, persuasively, when luncheon was over.

'No, thanks, dear,' she replied, quietly. 'The roads are very bad, and I have nearly a month's accounts to see too.'

'Never mind the accounts, Dolly. The ride would do you good; you look as if your head ached,' he urged kindly.

Very few men, and fewer women, ever realise that there is a time when sympathy of any sort is unendurable, and that all that those about them wish for is to be alone. Dolly unconsciously put her hand to her head, and passed it over her forehead in a troubled, weary manner.

'I would really rather do the accounts,' she replied, and as she spoke she smiled.

Squire Vernon knew quite well that the less said the better upon the subject which was uppermost n both their minds; but that smile of hers undid all his wise resolutions, and sent prudence to the winds. He went to her side, took her in his arms, and, soothing her as a mother might have soothed a little child, whispered brokenly in her ear,—

'My little Dolly, I am grieved to the heart for you!'

For a moment, she remained passively in his arms, and then suddenly her lips began to quiver. She rose hurriedly, and exclaiming 'Don't,' very abruptly hurried out of the room.

Sympathy was the one thing she could not bear just then. She must be as hard and cold as an icicle, and crush down every feeling which was dear to her. She must learn to look upon the man, whom but yesterday she had loved and trusted, and regarded as her future husband, as a stranger, as another woman's husband, and as a base and dishonourable man. She must put away all hopes and happiness which so far had been all in all to her, and she must begin life over again, from a different starting-point, but she must pass the hardening-post before she could do all that: and how could she do it if her father tried to sympathise with her, and to acknowledge her right to grieve?

The Squire was a thoroughly worried and troubled man. His kind heart ached for her; but what could he do? Nothing at all! only leave her alone to get over her trouble as best she could. Dolly was no longer the child that he could soothe and comfort and reason with. She would never be that child again; she was a woman; and her happiness and welfare had gone out of his keeping.

To most people, that thought would have been a bitter one. For many years the chief interest and object of the Squire's life had been the training of his young daughter; and the greatest happiness in it, the strong bond of perfect love and sympathy which existed between them. Comparatively a young man at the time of his wife's death, Squire Vernon had ever since that event devoted his life to Dolly, and now he knew that there was only one kind of love in this life which can ever be really *mutual* until the end, and that he buried it seventeen years ago in his young wife's grave. To any human being who has once been loved, who has ever been the first object in another's life, it cannot fail to be a bitter and heart-rending experience to feel that, as far as human love and sympathy goes, they stand absolutely alone; and that to no fellow-creature is their existence a matter of vital, or even great importance; and for a moment, as Dolly turned away from him, that was just how Squire Vernon felt. But Dolly's father was not the man to harbour any selfish or bitter feelings, and, in a moment, regret that he had ceased to be the chief object of his daughter's love, was buried in a multitude of sympathetic, self-accusing thoughts about that daughter.

Divided only by a wall, and the natural course of human nature, from the one human being he loved above all others, the Squire, after Dolly left him, passed the next few hours very nearly as miserably as the girl herself. That she must suffer, and that he could not lighten her burden for her in any way, troubled the Squire to the heart; and then that she should suffer at all, in such a cause, was naturally enough a very bitter pill for Dolly's father to swallow.

Dolly, when she had told him that she was going to do her accounts, had meant what she had said. The wish to do something to keep her mind occupied, if only for an hour, had seized her. Thought was unendurable, and, if possible, must be rendered impossible.

Without giving herself time to recover from that little burst of emotion which her father's sympathy had forced from her, she went straight into her sitting-room on

leaving him; and sitting down at her writing-table, she drew her account book and bills out of a drawer, and arranged them methodically before her.

The will is often good, but the power to follow it, indifferent; and Dolly studied one page of that account book of hers for more than half-an-hour, and yet at the end of that half-hour she did not know the nature of one single item entered in that page.

Then, quite suddenly, her head dropped, her arms fell forward on the table, her slight figure swayed, and she, with her face buried amongst her papers, began to sob bitterly.

Those sobs only came at long and broken intervals, but they were inexpressibly painful to the man who unintentionally heard them.

George Ventnor had opened the door softly, thinking to surprise her by his sudden appearance; and surprise her he certainly did, at a most unhappy moment.

He had taken two or three steps into the room before he realised the situation, and then one of those painful, long-drawn sobs fell upon his ears, and brought him to a standstill. George's honest, loving heart gave one great throb in the face of this unexpected trouble, and then it stood still, and for some time almost ceased to beat at all.

For a minute or two he hesitated, looked at the door, which he had closed behind him, and from it to the figure of the one and only woman he had ever loved. His reason bid him leave her alone with her grief, but his love and his sympathy wrestled against that more prudent, and, perhaps more courteous impulse, and, being the stronger of the two, won the day.

He stole across the room, sat down on the back of the large, square, old-fashioned stool upon which she was sitting, passed his arm gently round her, and drew her sobbing, unresisting figure closely to him, until her face was hidden against his broad, strong shoulder.

For several seconds the strangeness of the situation did not strike him; in the presence of this storm of grief of hers all lesser feelings were forgotten. In fact,

George was far too deeply grieved at seeing Dolly in such trouble to think at first of anything beyond it, and for quite a long time he sat beside her, holding her sobbing, convulsed figure carefully and tenderly in his arms, and soothing her by his sympathetic silence in a quiet, gentle manner that came to him instinctively, and was far more effective than any other course could have been in gaining its object.

It was the first time since their childhood that he had held her in his arms, and by-and-by George began to realise that, although he was acting in a fatherly, or rather motherly, manner, he was neither Dolly's father nor her mother. Presently, as he sat there, holding her slight figure closely to him, feeling it palpitating against his side, and nestling comfortably and lovingly in his arms, a strange rush of strong emotion began to course through his veins; and so true and honest was he, that it was with bitter self-reproach and annoyance that he greeted that inward tumult.

It was several minutes before George could forgive himself for so taking advantage of the confidence which Dolly was placing in him as a brother; George knew it was only as a brother. But good and true and honest as he was, George Ventnor was still a man, and, what was more, a young man, with a very highly-developed capacity for loving in an extremely passionate manner; and before very long the fact that the woman he loved was resting there in his arms overpowered all other feelings, and, in spite of her grief, became inexpressibly sweet to him.

He had always known that she was the only woman he could ever really love; but he had hardly realised all that she was to him, all that she would be to him if she became his own, and all that he would lose if he lost her, until now. Up to this time he had loved her because she was the most lovable, the truest, the best, and the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, and because she was just the very woman he would wish to be his wife; but now an undercurrent of absorbing passion, which had for a long time been lying dormant be-

neath the surface, rushed to the front, and it seemed to George that, if he lost her then, he would never be able to hold up his head again; that his best self would go with her, and be in her keeping through life, and that to live without her would be almost impossible, and quite unbearable.

Lost her! Yes, the knowledge that he would most probably lose her came to George with a stunning conviction as he held her in his arms, when she seemed nearer to him and dearer to him than either she or any other human being had ever been before. He had always realised that Dolly did not love him as he would have had her love him, but the possibility of her loving some one else struck him for the first time as he sat there beside her, listening to those gradually ceasing sobs. This grief of hers was of no ordinary nature, and Dolly was not in the least likely to cry about trifles.

'Dolly, darling,' he whispered at last. 'What is the matter, dear?'

His voice roused her. She drew herself quietly and gently away from him, and glanced up at him in a surprised, questioning manner.

'George!' she said wearily. 'Is it you? I thought it was my father.'

Her words cut him to the very quick. He had been so happy in the belief that she had been allowing him to soothe and comfort her, and that she had turned to him in her trouble; and now he knew that she had done no such thing, that she had believed that it was her father who was holding her in his arms, and that, if she had known that it was he, she would not have permitted him either to put his arm round her, or to witness her grief. Although it expressed no annoyance, her tone made all this quite clear to him. She was not in the least angry with him, she accepted his kindness as simply as, in the first instance, it had been offered; but she gave him very clearly to understand that in doing so she had been under a delusion, and that the little scene which followed that delusion was a mistake.

With that quick intuition which love ever brings with

it, the knowledge came to poor George, that if she had loved him ever so little, she would never have mistaken his arm for her father's, even with her eyes shut.

But George Ventnor seldom thought of his own troubles, when those of any fellow-creature were in the question; so naturally, when it became a question of Dolly *versus* himself, he put all thought of self aside.

'Never mind which of us it is, Dolly, dear,' he said gently. 'You know that either of us would give half we possess to save you a moment's trouble.'

And with that storm of emotion still strong within him, it was certainly generous of George to class himself with her father at that moment.

'Dear, dear old George, I know it!' she murmured softly; and as she spoke she laid one of those slender blue-veined hands, which Jack Denham loved, on the arm of the man who loved them a thousand times more; and glancing wistfully up into his face, she tried to smile.

'Is there anything I can do for you, Dolly?' he inquired gravely.

'Nothing,' she replied quietly. 'Nothing, except tell me that I am childish to cry so outrageously about trifles.'

'It is no trifle that is troubling you,' he returned somewhat sadly.

'Do not ask me what it is, George,' she said gravely. And do not speak of it again.'

'I will never do either the one or the other,' he replied quietly; and Dolly knew that the discovery which George had just made would be condemned for ever to the tomb of silence; and what was more, she knew that he would in no way try to discover the cause of her trouble. Young Lord Ventnor's word was beyond dispute, and would be kept to the very letter. Now that he understood that the cause of her trouble was a secret, it would be secret to him, even from himself. Knowing him as she knew him, Dolly fully realised that George would now go out of his way to avoid discovering the nature of her secret, until she herself might choose of her own accord to reveal it to him.

Her trouble must be hidden and buried in her own breast, and fought against and conquered. She had been weak to-day, but she must never be weak again; for her secret was not only a bitter one, it was wrong as well.

And Dolly, too worn out by recent events to care very much about anything, consoled herself by the thought that it did not matter much that she had mistaken George for her father, and that since George was such a very old friend, and such a dear good fellow, it was perhaps as well, after all, that he had happened to save her father from a painful and trying ordeal.

But Dolly quite forgot that this dear, good fellow, who was such a very old friend, unfortunately, like other men, possessed a heart; and it certainly never entered her head that the ordeal which he had gone through that afternoon tried him considerably more than it could possibly have tried her father, and that until his life's end it would stand out before his mind's eye as the bitterest, and by far the sweetest, half-hour that he had ever spent.

In our troubles and our joys we are all of us more or less egotistical; and, out of novels, the Georges to whom other people's troubles rank before their own are, alas! few and far between!

CHAPTER XVII.

'AWAY TO THE WINDS OUR CARES WE THROW.'

'With a hopeful heart and a conscience clear,
I can laugh in your face, Black Care,
Though you are hovering near, there's no room for you here,
On the back of my good grey mare.'

WHYTE MELVILLE.

Two months had gone by since Captain Denham's sudden departure from Wyndeane, and the frost, which had commenced just before that event, and had lasted several weeks, had broken thoroughly up at last, much to the satisfaction of the hunting division of Mudshire.

During those two months a very important matter had been settled by the members of the crack pack of hounds in that most sporting of all counties. Sir Thomas Hartlebury, who for more than a dozen seasons had been the master of the Muddleton hounds, had been obliged, owing to the departure of one of his lungs, and the very indifferent condition of the other, to resign that honourable post, and to permit himself to be borne away to the sunny climes of the south of France, where his medical attendant—who kindly resigned, in his turn, his recent occupation of ushering out of this life and into this life a certain portion of the Muddleton population, had consented to accompany him to those southern climes—assured him he might still exist for some time to come. Poor Sir Thomas! He detested those southern climes; detested, as some Englishmen do, anything foreign, and, above all, anything French. He was devoted to every hound in his pack, every horse in his stable, every acre of that vast estate which his grandfather and his grandfather's grandfather had held and loved before him, and which, by some incredible miracle, was still one of the most prosperous and flourishing of properties, and he would greatly have preferred to die at Clyby Court than to live in the south of France.

And meanwhile, slowly dying on that foreign soil, Sir Thomas Hartlebury had one great consolation—his old friend, the one man whom above all others he honoured as a man and respected as a true sportsman, had taken over from him the mastership of the Muddleton hounds.

Dolly's father reigned in his stead, and really no one, not being a sportsman, could know what a keen satisfaction and a real consolation that little fact was to the ex-M. F. H.

The ex-M. F. H. was only one man amongst a hundred others who rejoiced greatly that Squire Vernon had taken the Muddleton hounds. With one accord the Muddletonites agreed that there was only one man in Mudshire whom they could have 'cottoned' to after Sir Thomas Hartlebury, who was about as popular an M. F. H. as ever bestrode a pigskin, and that that man was the new master.

As to the new master, he accepted the post, as most new masters do, because everyone wished him to do so, and because it was clear to him that really he was the most suitable man to take it. Another reason also had he—Dolly wished it. Now, had Dolly wished for the moon just then, he would certainly have racked his brain as to what was the nearest approach that could be procured to that impossibility. So, of course, he accepted all the responsibilities attached to the management of a crack pack of hounds without hesitation, when she expressed a wish that he should do so. Not that on his own account he cared for an office which would tie him hand and foot; for the Squire loved a gallop, and he loved his freedom, and in his heart of hearts he had no great ambition to become an M. F. H.; but he could see that by accepting the hounds he would please everyone, and, above all others, Dolly, giving her a new interest, and, in a way, a new occupation; and Squire Vernon was not the man to refuse to do good and to give pleasure to others—and to Dolly.

Of course it was most fortunate, in the Squire's opinion, that anything had turned up to interest Dolly just then,—for Dolly had been looking very worn and pale lately, and the Squire was more than a little anxious about her state of health, and still more anxious as to her state of mind. I put the health before the mind because the world invariably ranks it there; but as to how much the latter affects the former, in nine cases out of ten, who can say?

That the fact that her father had taken the hounds gave Dolly the greatest satisfaction, the Squire fully realised; that it should do so, caused him great surprise. Dolly, either owing to her father's careful training or her own natural good sense and feeling, was, although devoted to hunting and to horses, not that worst of all horrible specimens of humanity—that is to say of that portion of humanity which exists in good society—a horsey woman.

Now there are two distinct species of 'horsey' women. There is the woman who discourses loudly upon hunting in general, her own particular manner of dealing with an awkward horse, or of riding at an awkward fence, and of

the ailments, and the treatment of the ailments, of her own horses and the horses of her friends—of which she, in common with her sex, knows absolutely nothing at all. She will insist upon making herself heard in whatever society she may be in. Scowls from relatives, barely concealed smiles from the sporting division, and utterly bored expressions upon the faces of the non-sporting division of her audience, are alike unavailing. That woman will talk, and she will make herself heard, and nothing and nobody in this world will stop her.

And then there is the other species; the woman who knows that this kind of thing is vulgar, and not only unlady-like, but unwomanly. And who would not dream of holding forth in public in this manner,—and yet will descant upon the subject to other women, and before other women, who she knows cannot make head or tail of what she is talking about. She will give these other women very plainly to understand that because she hunts, she is made of quite a different clay to other ordinary, every-day women, and that she is altogether a very superior species of humanity; she will delight to give non-hunting men a like benefit; but all the time she knows that all this is not in the best of taste, and she will be careful to select her audience before she ventures to launch forth.

Considering that certainly half the women who hunt belong to one or other of these species of humanity, perhaps I am rather down upon hunting women; but then hunting women should remember that, when they place themselves upon a level with the sterner sex, they should be careful to copy them in more ways than one, and that, being women, they should be the more especially careful how they do it, and whom they copy. Every man who has a certain income, and lives in the country, keeps, according to the capabilities of that income, a certain number of horses; but keeping hunters, and riding them across country, no more makes a sportsman than buying a paint brush, some oil colours, magilp, and canvas, and daubing the canvas with the magilp and colours, makes an artist; and women, if they wish to

join in that most uplifting and exhilarating of all sports, foxhunting, should, if they are not sportswomen, at any rate copy sportsmen.

But this is a digression, and a very round-about way of explaining to you that Miss Vernon was a perfect sportswoman, and a perfect lady, and that there was not a single member of the Muddleton Hunt who would not have told you so; and that Miss Vernon, rather to her father's surprise, had set her mind hotly upon his taking the hounds; and so, as I said before, he took them.

And now let us follow the new M. F. H. and his daughter to Finchbank Green, which was the meet of the Muddleton upon the day this chapter opens. It was Dolly's favourite meet; and 'Viking,' the horse she had just mounted, was her favourite hunter. Her face, which had been very white lately, had now a tinge of colour in its cheeks, and her large grey eyes were sparkling with a very fair imitation of their old life and radiancy.

The Squire had been very much troubled about her, and it had grieved him sorely to notice how soon a happy girl could become a care-worn young woman. Not but that Dolly had tried to appear her own old self,—smiling, laughing, talking as of old; but because that smile and laugh were no longer the smile and laugh of seventeen, and her conversation had an unconscious undercurrent of sadness and satire in it. Dolly, at heart, had not been happy; and her father had been very conscious of that fact. He was infinitely thankful that she had sufficient pride and pluck to show a thoroughly good face after that most unpleasant matter; but the struggle which had been going on within her had been very painful to him; and thus it was that, when he noted that little flush of real enjoyment, and that little gleam of natural brightness, it comforted and pleased him greatly.

'Dolly is getting over that business at last!' he congratulated himself. And, having arrived at that pleasing conclusion, he began to give his undivided attention to the business in hand, and thought no more just then of Dolly.

And meanwhile, Dolly found her way to a somewhat muddy path on the south side of the covert, in the company of Captain Dasher, Sir Henry Vane, a stranger Dolly had never seen before, and Tom, the first whip.

Captain Dasher was the crack rider of the Muddleton hounds, and he was a great and an old friend of Dolly Vernon's.

Sir Henry Vane was a blustering, hard-riding baronet, who was far from popular in Mudshire, and whom Dolly simply and honestly detested.

The stranger was a fair, good-looking young fellow, of about eight-and-twenty, who looked as if he possibly could ride.

Having said a few quiet, pleasant words of greeting to Captain Dasher, and bestowed a far stiffer bow than she was at all aware of upon Sir Henry Vane, Dolly moved on a few paces away from them, and lapsed into silence —a silence which was unbroken, and during which the stranger—no less important a person than Bob Netherley, heir to one of the finest estates and oldest baronies in Gayshire, a cousin of Lady Francis Fairsmore's, who had come down to Mudshire for a fortnight's hunting,— watched Dolly surreptitiously, and wondered to himself who the smart-looking young woman on the grey could be.

Finchbank was a big wood; and although, when once you got away from it, you were pretty certain to have a real good run, there was generally a pleasing doubt as to whether you would get well away or not.

A fact that Mr Robert Netherley had already realised, and had acted upon in hanging about the vicinity of Tom. But so business-like did Miss Vernon look, that when she suddenly turned her horse's head and galloped off down a side path to the left, he was the first to notice and to follow her.

In another minute he was closely followed by Captain Dasher and Sir Henry Vane.

It was perfectly clear to them all by this time that the hounds were breaking covert on the Hamley side of it— the side on which, unless some very bad luck interfered to prevent it, they were certain to have a clinking run.

'By Jove, that grey can jump a bit!' observed Bob Netherley mentally, as he prepared himself to negotiate a very good-sized drain with a rather formidable fence on the far side of it, which divided the covert from the field beyond it, and over which 'Viking' had flown, apparently without any inconvenience to himself.

The grey could gallop as well as jump, as was soon apparent to Mr Netherley, for Dolly sailed away in front of him at the very tail of the hounds, who were racing away at a tremendous pace upwind.

They had got a capital start; and in the company of Belton, the huntsman, the Squire, Lord Somers, George Ventnor, a soldier from Muddleton, and a hard-riding young farmer, our four friends had the field very much to themselves.

Sir Henry Vane was riding rather wide of the hounds to the left, Captain Dasher, George, and the Squire a little to the right.

Belton, who was close beside Dolly, found time to say, 'We are in for a gallop,' and to cast his eye somewhat anxiously at Sir Henry, who was noted for pressing the hounds. His anxiety on this score was shortly removed, however, for Sir Henry crashed hopelessly over a stiff bit of timber, and disappeared bodily into the ditch upon the far side of it.

The rest negotiated the place safely, with the exception of Mr Bob Netherley, whose bay dropped its hind legs into the ditch, and wasted several precious moments in a peck and a scramble; its owner, by this time sincerely wishing that he was riding any other horse in his stable instead of this young one, pulled him together and sent him along, somewhat ruthlessly, over a stiff bit of plough.

By so doing he caught up Dolly, who had been easing Viking over it a little more cautiously than the others, and was now a little in the rear of them. She landed over a small hedge, which led out of the plough, a few yards to the right of him, and then, finding herself in a large grass field, proceeded to make up for lost time.

At the next fence the soldier from Muddleton came to

grief, and the division with the hounds found themselves reduced to eight; but of these, four undeniably had the best of it: the huntsman, Captain Dasher, the farmer,—Jim Bates by name,—and the M. F. H.'s daughter. Four more fields, and Jim Bates' horse, which had been a little over-ridden, began to peck and blunder at every fence, and Belton's horse also threw out signs of distress. The latter, upon coming to a straggling kind of fence, which hung over and nearly concealed a far wider ditch than either he or his rider expected to find there, landed into it, and in so doing baulked Jim Bates' already blown horse, and caused him to resolutely shut up as he approached it.

Belton had been leading the field until that misfortune overtook him, and now Captain Dasher, jumping the place to the right of him, took his place. A little to the left, and in a by no means unenviable position, rode Dolly Vernon. Her horse was as yet comparatively fresh, and had not up to this time made a single peck. Although tall, Dolly was light, and, added to this, she had a large stock of that discretion which, in the hunting field, at any rate, is certainly the better part of valour. For valour may make a hard rider; but unless it runs hand in hand with that knowledge which discretion teaches, it will never make a good one.

As to George Ventnor, Robert Netherley, Lord Somers, Jim Bates, Belton, Sir Henry, the M. F. H., and the soldier from little Muddleton, they were one and all by this time considerably out of the run, and none of them felt at all in a humour to agree with that sportsman, who declared that, 'Lookers-on see the most of the game, and that for real amusement, there is probably no place like the *last* in the hunting field.'

But as to Dolly, as slowly and surely she piloted Viking into that first place, which Captain Dasher, much as he admired her, only grudgingly and reluctantly was at last obliged to resign to her, she was enjoying herself to the top of her bent. There was a deep flush of excitement upon her face, and her eyes were simply sparkling with enjoyment as, sitting well down in her saddle,

she held her own against the best riders in Mudshire, at the very tail of the hounds.

For the first time since Jack Denham's departure, Dolly forgot all about him; all her troubles, all her sense of disgrace, and everything—everything save the intense pleasure of leading the field in a real good thing. She was living every moment of her life as she tore along, heedless of all alike, except a deeply-set determination to hold it all her own way to the finish. No dreaming. No hoping. No vain regrets for Dolly now! Only that keen sense of life and freshness, which, coming from one source only, is so unlike all others, and so perfectly beyond the comprehension of anyone who has not experienced it, that it is quite useless to try to describe it. That sense of life, of superiority, of utter content and wild enjoyment, was flowing hotly through Dolly's veins; and she wondered vaguely, as she tore along, how she could ever have been so foolish and so narrow as to make a deep grievance of one small trouble; why she had not charged it, and got over it at once, as she charged and pushed through the awkward bullfinch in front of her? Why she had not faced the difficulty, and put it away from her at once? Why she had 'funked' the fence before her, and remained pottering behind it in the company of a lot of poor-spirited, weak-minded people, who had no pluck, no strength of character, and no determination about them.

At that moment it came home to Dolly that life was never meant to be moped in; that it is too short; and, if we use it properly, too precious. That it was given us to be useful in, and to make the best of, by being happy in. Dolly was not thinking of that vast portion, that greater portion of humanity, into whose lives so little sunshine falls, and who hereafter, let us believe, will be requited for their troubles here; but of her own life, and lives like hers, comparatively over-loaded with earthly blessings, and certainly owing it to the Giver of all things to be grateful for those many blessings, and to make the best and not the worst of all the goodness which has been shown to them.

Alas! how often one grievance takes away all our sense of gratitude for a thousand blessings, and how we sin in allowing it to do so! But this is a digression again, for I was describing a hunting run, and now I am preaching something like a sermon—not but what the run may plant the whole gist of a dozen sermons into our minds and lives, without any disrespect to the sermons; for Dolly's favourite hunter landed her that day safely over every obstacle, and brought her in second to none of the end of the best run the Muddleton had had that season, and at the same time landed her out of the slough of despair, and brought her into a better frame of mind.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MRS CONINGHAM'S BALL.

'Her heart is well worth the winning,
But Love is a gift of the free,
And she vowed, from the very beginning,
She'd never come over to thee.'

WHYTE MELVILLE.

AT about twelve o'clock upon a certain night in June that same year, Lord Ventnor's house in Park Lane was all bedecked with flowers, flooded in lime-light, and cooled, as far as it lay in human power to cool it, with enormous blocks of ice. It was the night of Mrs Coningham's ball, and Mrs Coningham's ball always was acknowledged to be quite one of the best in London.

Early as it was, Dolly Vernon was there already. Mrs Coningham had asked her to come early; and Dolly, little knowing, and still less caring, what the world in general thought about it, or what remarks were being made about her very pronounced friendship with her cousin, had done as Mrs Coningham wished, and she and the Squire were the first people who arrived.

George, realising that she was there, rushed pell-mell to meet her; and Dolly, who was running lightly up the

broad stairs ahead of her father, collided with her cousin as they simultaneously turned a corner.

They both made a little backward movement, and their eyes met.

'You are looking your very best to-night,' exclaimed George, with conviction.

It was the very first compliment he had ever paid her, and it naturally took Dolly by surprise. She smiled mischievously up at him, and bobbed a little, very graceful curtsey.

'My dear boy, I have always had misgivings as to the excellence of your artistic taste, but I must doubt it no longer!' she retorted lightly.

'I know nothing whatever about art, Dolly,' he returned in the same tone; 'but I do know when a thing looks pretty. Come up here. I want to ask you if this is right; it looks all wrong to me.'

'The thing,' as he has just delineated her, laughed softly, and followed him. For some little time these two young people wandered about together, discussing this and that, while the Squire talked to Mrs Coningham in the drawing-room.

Then the people began to arrive. Having shaken hands with Mrs Coningham and Lord Ventnor, those arriving guests nearly all cast a passing glance at the tall girl in apple-green, who stood a little way behind her hostess, talking to an ever-increasing group of men who surrounded her.

One and all,—save, of course, a few country cousins, who were merely passing through town, and knew nothing of that season's doings,—knew who that tall, fair-haired girl was. Miss Vernon was one of the beauties of the season, and everyone either knew, or pretended to know, all about her.

George had been quite right. Dolly was looking her very best; everyone acknowledged it. Miss Vernon had never looked so well, indeed, in her life before. Some of the women averred that she was wearing too many diamonds, that an apple-green tulle, ornamented profusely about the bodice with those costly gems, ill-befitted so

young a girl; but there was not a man in the room who agreed with these ladies. Both Dolly and her diamonds were bright and pleasant to behold, and they suited each other admirably.

To say that she was not conscious of the sensation she was causing is absurd, although assuredly no one could have accused her of appearing so.

She was enjoying herself, and, in spite of everything, she was still young enough to enjoy herself quite childishly. She was talking a great deal in a bright, although quiet, manner, which evidently was very attractive; and every now and then a soft little laugh of honest amusement passed her lips. Dolly had a very pleasant way of laughing, and she very seldom laughed at all, and those two facts between them constituted one of her greatest charms. (Preserve me from the woman who laughs at every other word she says! How wearisome, how intensely tiresome she is, and how one vows, while with her, that one will never laugh again!)

By-and-by Lady Francis Fairsmore came slowly onwards up the stairs, borne upwards by the ever-increasing crowd, and in her wake came Lady Mary Grey and Mr Robert Netherley. The latter smiled broadly as he approached Dolly, and, colouring uncomfortably, as fair men are apt to do at times, he asked her if she could spare him a dance?

'I am so sorry,' she murmured graciously, 'but indeed I cannot, Mr Netherley. We came very early, and people know I am going to stay on here, and so I am engaged for every dance there is. But,' she added kindly, noting the blank expression of dismay which was settling upon his face, 'I will come now, and sit down and talk to you until this square is finished, if you like.'

Mr Netherley did like this proposition, and, with Miss Vernon on his arm, proceeded rather consequentially to wend his way through the crowd, in search of a promising-looking seat—which, however, he had not far to go before he found.

And there they sat together for perhaps ten minutes. Dolly was rather bored with the young man, whom by

this time she knew fairly well, and who, she was well aware, imagined himself desperately in love with her, but he was a cousin of Fanny's, so she, as usual, tried to make the best of him.

It rather amused her to watch, as she could from where they were, the crush of people who were coming up the stairs. The manner in which a fashionable crowd conducted itself was still rather a novelty to her, and she was much impressed by it; so while she talked to Mr Netherley, who had arrived at that stage of bliss which rarely has much to say for itself, she amused herself in this way.

Presently, in the middle of something which she was saying to him, she stopped abruptly, and laughed softly to herself:

'Oh, there is my funny old lady and her two plain daughters—and, yes! there is their pompous old papa!'

Mr Netherley's eyes turned at once from a contemplation of a remarkably neat foot which peeped out from beneath an apple-green tulle ball dress, and his glance, following the direction of hers, rested upon the crowd that was slowly passing by

He coloured perceptibly, as Dolly could not have failed to notice had she been looking at him.

'Your funny old lady!' he repeated quietly. 'Now, where have you seen that old lady before?'

'Not often,' laughed Dolly. 'Only once, in fact, and that was at Court. You cannot think how funny they were there—all of them! The old lady bent upon getting through the barriers the very moment it was possible to do so; hurrying on those hopelessly plain daughters of hers; admonishing them; giving little pats and tugs to their attire, and making them, oh! so palpably miserable and nervous! And then their father! Very scarlet in the face, tremendously self-important and self-conscious, clad in garments a world too tight for him, and carrying, rather shame-facedly, the dear old lady's shawl! Cannot you see them, Mr Netherley?' and she turned a smiling, inquiring glance upon the young man who sat beside her. 'Oh! what is the matter!' she exclaimed aghast, as

her eyes rested upon his face. 'What have I said? Something dreadful, I am certain!'

'No, no, Miss Vernon. You amused me vastly, I assure you—and you gave me the most accurate and vivid description of my relatives imaginable,' he returned good-humouredly.

'Your relations?' murmured Dolly, growing most becomingly pink in the cheeks.

'Yes,' he replied, smiling, for he was far too much in love with her, and well aware of how pretty she looked in her confusion, to be in a humour to take offence at anything she said or did.

'What relations?' she gasped.

'My father, mother, sisters,' laughed he; 'good, worthy souls, all of them—in spite of their appearances.'

'Well,' said Dolly slowly, 'this is the first and the last time I will ever make any remarks to a stranger about other strangers again. And now, let us return to the ballroom.'

'A stranger, Miss Vernon? Return to the ballroom? You are dreadfully cruel, and add injury to—' he began plaintively, but Dolly cut him short.

'Insult!' she said shortly. 'Exactly, Mr Netherley. But you need not adopt that tone; the awkwardness of what has happened falls entirely upon me.'

'That is one way of looking at it, certainly,' agreed he, laughing.

'The only way. Shall we say no more about it?'

'By all means. Only please, Miss Vernon, give me a few more minutes.'

'Impossible,' returned Dolly, smiling. 'There is no peace for the weary in a London ballroom. Here comes Sir Frederic Duvane.'

It was more than a couple of hours afterwards that George wended his way to Dolly's side, and exclaimed joyfully,—

'At last, Dolly! I really thought I never should get away.'

'Poor dear!' she murmured mockingly.

'It is so tantalising to see you surrounded by a crowd

of other fellows,' murmured George. 'Smiling at them. Don't you smile too much, dear?'

'No, I do not think so, George,' she returned thoughtfully; and then glancing up suddenly, she laughed.

'And dancing,' he began jestingly.

'Now, George, please do not say I dance too much. But dancing is really out of the question; so let us go and sit down somewhere.'

'By all means,' he agreed, readily. 'And I'll tell you what we will do, Dolly. We will have a ball at Ventnor Castle, and we will only have about forty couples at it; and you and I will be one of those couples, and we will make it the order of the evening that no one is to change partners. Then we shall really have a pleasant ball.'

'I doubt it, George,' she returned. 'It might get rather monotonous.'

George glanced wistfully at her.

She was sitting upon a low sofa, half hidden by a mass of huge hot-house plants and flowers; and framed as she was by them, in the soft, subdued light, which seemed to intensify her beauty a hundred-fold, she made a very charming and a very beautiful picture.

George Ventnor was a sensible young man; and he more than suspected that she did not love him; but, as his eyes rested upon her, his natural good sense and reason began to fade rapidly away. He did not feel his own, everyday self; there was something exceedingly incentive about the situation in which he found himself.

That everlasting game of patience which he had been playing in the past; that prudent resolve to wait until a suitable time offered itself, which he had adhered to for so long, were no longer uppermost in his thoughts as he stood beside her, leaning against the wall behind him, looking down at her.

How soft and silky that golden hair of hers was! How very, very white her rounded neck and arms! What a depth of expression in those dark, lovely grey eyes!

Down in Mudshire he had loved her for her own dear self's sake. Now, for the first time, he found himself

hopelessly overpowered by her beauty. Whether a thing of beauty is, or is not, an everlasting joy, it is certain that George found this especial thing of beauty, which he had now so close to him, a joy that was just a trifle more than he could carry.

'*Monotonous!* Dolly?' he repeated, at the same time slipping down on to the seat beside her.

His tone had undergone a complete change; and Dolly, startled by it, glanced up at him hurriedly.

And then in a moment she knew the truth. For the first time in her life she realised that George Ventnor was not her brother.

A little gasping sigh came from her lips, and one small hand clenched the other nervously.

'Yes, of course, monotonous,' she replied at last, quite quietly. 'We are not Canadians, and Canadian fashions would not, therefore, suit us.'

George's face was quivering with emotion; and Dolly, although she dare not look at him, was well aware of it.

'Go and get me an ice,' she continued, before he had time to speak. 'It is getting unbearably hot here.'

George looked at her earnestly and closely for a second or two; but the expression upon her face was impenetrable. Then, without saying a word, he rose and walked away.

At that moment the strains of the Dorothy valse came falling and swelling through the open doorway near which Dolly sat; and nestling back amongst the foliage that surrounded her, so as to avoid her next partner, whom she felt just then totally unprepared to face, she sat there quietly listening to it.

And as she listened to it, a very strange feeling stole over her. A feeling as if she was quite alone in the world; a being apart from the crowd of human beings, which passed to and fro before her eyes. A sensation as if her life was slipping away from her, mocking her as it went.

She did not love George Ventnor, and she knew she never would love him; but suddenly a glimpse of what might have been was revealed to her, and with it came a

sense of keen regret and dreariness. She knew fully all she lost by not being able to love her cousin; and the fact that her whole life had been spoilt for her stared her in the face.

'Dolly,' said a voice close beside her, and woke her from her dream. She looked up at the speaker and tried to smile,—little knowing the sad apathy there was in that smile of hers. It went straight to the right place in George's heart.

'Why, Dolly, dear,' he whispered softly, 'what is the matter? Whatever you do, you must not take it to heart like this, dear. You have found out my secret at last, but everyone else knew it ages ago. It is no matter, none at all, Dolly! I have been a fool to-night, and mightily inconsiderate; but it's an old affair enough, and no different to usual. It cannot hurt you to know I love you, darling; and surely it need make no difference.'

A pause, during which, for a moment, a small warm hand stole into his and pressed it convulsively.

'Come in here,' he said quietly; and so saying rose and led the way into his mother's own especial sitting-room; a room that had not been opened out to the general public. Entering it he held the door open for her to pass, and then followed her into the room, leaving it ajar,—although he knew that no one was in the least likely to come that way.

Dolly crossed over to the still open window. She was stifling, and longed for a breath of air.

'My dear little woman,' he continued softly, looking tenderly down at her. 'I know that you do not love me—that in all probability you never will love me. I am a plain, unattractive fellow at the best of times, and I know I am not the sort of chap who is likely to take a woman's fancy.'

'Oh, George—don't!' she exclaimed pitifully.

'But I love you, Dolly. And I would do anything in this world for you. And if it bothers you to know I love you, I will promise never to mention a word about my love for you again.'

For all answer she glanced for a second up into his

face, and then turned her head away, with a quivering lip.

'Darling, for Heaven's sake do not do that!' he exclaimed in dire consternation. 'What a beast I am! What have I said or done?'

'Everything in the world—all my life—to make me love you,' she returned passionately. 'But I cannot do it, George.'

'I know it, dear,' he returned humbly. 'And I think I know why,' he continued, in a very low tone, after a moment's hesitation. 'I think you care for—Denham.'

For ever since that day when he had found Dolly sobbing over her account-books, George had had a very shrewd suspicion of the truth.

'Captain Denham is a married man!' was the quiet reply.

'Good Heavens!' exclaimed George sharply. 'I had no idea of that.'

And then Dolly realised that he knew. That sharp, horrified exclamation told her so. She shrank away from him, and covered her face with her hands.

'Oh, I did not know, George,' she murmured pitifully. 'I did not know.'

There was a moment's silence, and then George suddenly gripped those two little hands in a grasp of iron, and holding them in his, drew her closely to him, and gazed down into her face.

'Darling!' he returned passionately, 'my own poor, little darling; will you be my—wife?'

She started away back from him. 'Never, George!' she replied resolutely. 'Never, my dear, dear old George!'

'My whole life is wrapped up in you, Dolly, and always will be so. I know why you are saying "No" to me, my darling—but cease to look upon the matter from that point of view. You love this man—bad as he is you love him. Oh, I know, darling, that we cannot love and unlove at our will! I do not ask you for your love, only give me the chance to try to win it,' he hesitated, and then took her hands again in his. 'My darling, I

feel I could make you happy—that—if you would only—marry me—I could make you love me.'

'That is just it, George,' she returned sadly. 'You would always be wearing yourself to death in a vain endeavour.'

'I will risk that,' he replied gravely.

'No, you will not, my dear boy,' returned Dolly very firmly. 'I am not quite so bad yet as to do that.'

'But, Dolly, I do not ask you for your love. I would rather have you for my wife without it, than spend my life without you! All I ask or wish is to try to make you happy. My darling, listen to me!'

'I am listening, George, dear,' she returned gently. 'But what you wish is perfectly impossible. I will never do you such a terrible injustice.'

'Oh, Dolly, to talk of it like that!'

'Yes, like that! as it really is!' she returned firmly. 'George, believe me when I say that—I—lov—ed—him far too much to ever think of marrying another man. Heaven forgive me for it!'

'I was afraid you did,' he said sadly. 'My poor, dear little cousin, I was afraid it was as bad as this.'

'And you do not hate me—knowing that?'

'Hate you, darling! I shall love you, and honour you, above all other women, to my life's end,' he replied solemnly.

And then for several seconds, hands clasped in hands, they stood looking full into each other's eyes.

'Oh, I wish so much that I was as ugly as—Julia Seaton! Then, perhaps, I should not bring trouble to my dearest friends,' she sighed weariedly.

'Oh, Dolly,' he returned gravely, 'love is not like that. I may think you beautiful, my darling, I do think you so; but I do not love you for your beauty's sake.'

Dolly, with a trembling lip, turned her face away, so that he might not see the pained expression which rested upon it; for a second time that night she compared her cousin with another man.

'I know that,' she murmured almost unconsciously. 'Only if I had been plain, my life, and my father's, and

yours, George, would have been as happy as the day is long.'

And with that curious speech she turned quickly away, and left him alone in his mother's dimly-lit boudoir.

And who shall say what thoughts coursed through our ideal George's brain during the following minutes, or how he blessed the man who had stepped between him and all he loved best in life?

The next day a tall, strongly-built young man, buried behind a newspaper, was sitting in an arm-chair in the Carlton Club. His attention became suddenly attracted by the following conversation, which, a few yards away from him, was being carried on between two men. One of these men was a stranger to him, the other Sir Henry Vane.

'Capital ball at Ventnor House last night. And Miss Vernon looked lovely,' said the stranger.

'Ah, yes—goodish dance. As to our friend, she is going it pretty hotly with Ventnor,' drawled Sir Henry.

A pause.

'I don't think he quite sees it somehow, you know. She is fastish, and I don't think young George cares much for the style,' continued the baronet.

'You seem to know all about me, and have become very free and easy with my name, Sir Henry,' said the quiet—the ominously quiet—voice of the tall, strongly-built young man, who had risen from his seat, tossed aside 'The Times,' and stood revealed before them. 'And as to Miss Vernon, you may tell your friends a different version of the story of my friendship with her—my cousin, in the future. You may give it out, if you needs must gossip, that I would give everything I possess to think it possible that she would become my wife. And,' he added, still more quietly, 'I should strongly recommend anyone who wants to make snobbish remarks about a young lady who has always openly snubbed that person because he is—fastish, and not her style, to be very sure that I am not present before he does so in the future.'

And then, white with suppressed rage, young George turned abruptly round and walked away, leaving Sir Henry in a state of mind which is easier to imagine than to express.

CHAPTER XIX.

LADY FRANCIS FAIRSMORE'S PROPOSITION.

'A millstone and a human heart are driven ever round,
If they have nothing else to grind, they must themselves be ground.'
LONGFELLOW.

VERY shortly after that ball at Ventnor House, all our friends were back again in Mudshire. And Dolly—who, much to the Squire's discomfort, looked knocked up and worn out with her season in town—was sitting under the trees in the garden at Wyndeane.

The day was perfect; the sky a mass of azure blue; and the sunshine fell softly on the grand old trees and the many-gabled house where she was born. It lingered over the valley lying beneath the garden, and rested lovingly upon the hills, which towered one above another, far away beyond it, until the whole panorama seemed to be melting in a living gold. And Dolly gave a little sigh of real regret, that she had wasted the very best part of the whole year away from all this beauty, in a dusty, smoky, over-populated town.

She was very tired; a new sensation to her; and presently the glorious scene before her eyes began to fade away, grew mistier and mistier, and then became obliterated; Dolly was asleep.

And while she slept her father and Lady Francis Fairsmore came strolling down the terraces to look for her. When they found her, they looked simultaneously into each other's faces; the same thought in both their minds.

Dolly made a very pretty picture, and such a perfect foreground to the scene beyond her, that they both stood

there in silent admiration for several seconds, unwilling to disturb her.

Her long curling dark eyelashes were resting softly on a cheek that, if a shade paler than it ought to have been, was still too delicate to be found fault with. Her little curving lips were slightly parted, a faint smile upon them, such as one sees upon a child's in sleep. A ray of sunshine gleaming through the foliage of the trees above her fell lightly on her golden hair, and then glanced downwards until it touched one of her small delicate hands; and then no one could have denied that her tall figure, as it rested at ease against the soft cushions of the low basket-chair in which she sat, was perfect; rounded and graceful in every curve. Delicately rounded arms, a lovely wrist; small, well-shaped feet and the neatest of ankles. Nor had a season in town, and a long course of dressmakers and tailors rendered that figure a deformity—supple and firm in spite of art, it remained as nature made it; and just now decked in the softest of white cambric skirts and pale, pink loose-fitting shirts, it was certainly quite pretty enough, and attractive enough, to justify the admiration which Lady Francis and the Squire bestowed upon it.

As they stood there silently watching her, she stirred uneasily, as if conscious of some disturbing element in her proximity; and presently she opened her eyes and looked up at them.

The next moment she was on her feet, and in another she was settling Fanny Fairsmore in the chair which she had just been reposing in so comfortably. Then she sat down on the grass at Fanny's feet, and glancing first at her father and then at her friend, exclaimed brightly,—

'Well, what is it? I can see quite well by the generally abashed expression on your faces, that you two foolish people have been hatching some plot without my knowledge or consent. Now, I warn you beforehand that, whatever it may be, I shall certainly disapprove of it.'

'Do not mention that fact, Dolly,' laughed her father. 'I am quite aware that I have not spoilt you for eighteen

years for nothing. You would never pay me such a poor compliment as that.'

'Did you ever know such a tiresome creature?' returned Dolly, appealing to Lady Francis Fairsmore.

'Never!' replied she, glancing up with a pleasant little smile at the Squire.

'Perhaps I had better go away?' he suggested meekly.

'Indeed, but you must do nothing of the kind, Squire,' exclaimed her little ladyship. 'I refuse to be left alone to battle single-handed with this headstrong daughter of yours. She is at least seven inches taller than I am, and she is very much the stronger of the two. No, my dear Squire, I must really ask you to see me to the end of this business. Will you sit down?' waving her hand towards a chair on the other side of Dolly.

'Hedged in on both sides!' exclaimed that young woman. 'This is really too bad! Well, to business. I hate business when the sun is shining, so let us get it over.'

'I have an idea in my mind, and I mean to see it carried out,' explained Lady Francis, with a smile.

'I certainly should see it carried out, if I were you, Fan!' returned Dolly gravely. 'You have so few, you see.'

'I am going to Saltcliff for a fortnight or so,' continued Lady Francis, scorning to retort to this impertinence.

'Poor dear! You will be bored to death; I pity you,' returned Dolly, with difficulty suppressing a smile.

'Do not trouble to do so,' said her friend quietly. 'I mean to take you with me; and so, whenever I have nothing else to do, I can quarrel with you. Is it not Byron who says,—"'Tis sometimes sweet to have our quarrels. Particularly with a tiresome friend"?'

'And I agree with him. If you happen to have got one,' replied Dolly.

'I am fortunate there,' returned Lady Fanny, laughing. 'I have certainly one, at any rate.'

'But she is not going to Saltcliff with you, my lady,' returned Dolly, with decision. 'If you must go to Saltcliff, and you must have someone to quarrel with there,

take that big, amusing sister of yours, she will answer your purpose admirably.'

'Indeed, but she will not. To begin with, she always gets the best of it if we quarrel, and quarrelling with one's friends is far from sweet under those circumstances; and to end with, Dolly, I have set my heart upon taking you with me.'

'Ah, you are becoming reasonable now. I am indispensable to your happiness, after all, you see,' returned Dolly; and then altering her tone, 'Well, to put aside this nonsense, you and my father think I am looking ill, and you want to exile me to that abominable place Saltcliff in consequence. You are, both of you, dear, good creatures, and you are willing to sacrifice yourselves on my account. You need not shake your heads like that; I know all about it. You will be "quite lost" without me, Dads, and you will be quite bored to death at Saltcliff, Fan. I am very grateful to you both, but I am going to stay at home.'

'Dolly, I really wish you to go,' put in her father quietly.

'And I really want to go with you,' added Lady Francis.

'Very well,' assented Dolly quietly. 'Thank you.'

'Then that is settled!' exclaimed the Squire in a well-satisfied tone of voice, smiling at Lady Francis over the top of Dolly's head.

'What is settled?' inquired George Ventnor, emerging from a shrubbery path behind them.

'That we, Fanny and I, are going to Saltcliff for a fortnight, some time soon,' replied Dolly resignedly.

'Saltcliff! Is that a good sort of place to go to?' asked George.

'Not at all, in my opinion,' replied Dolly drily. Then she added brightly, in quite a different tone of voice, 'Yes, it is; a very nice place indeed; and I think we shall have very good fun.'

'Well, if it comes to fun,' returned George calmly, smiling at the Squire as he spoke, 'I do not see any reason why you and Lady Francis should have it all to

yourselves; do you, Squire? Suppose we run down there too; at any rate for a few days.'

'All right, George. We will think it over,' replied that gentleman, very well pleased with the suggestion.

'Have we your permission?' asked George, turning to Lady Francis, who had been singularly quiet and silent since his arrival upon the scene.

'Certainly,' she replied, with a pleasant little smile. All her versatility seemed to have deserted her; and having given that short, though courteous answer, she once again lapsed into silence.

'Oh, dear!' sighed Dolly; 'are we going to take all Mudshire with us?'

'I think you may evade doing so, if you keep your intention of going there very quiet indeed,' replied George, gravely. 'May I sit down? Thanks. Now we can talk it over comfortably.' And so saying, George flung himself down at her feet.

Once there, however, he forgot to talk it over. For in spite of the fact that he knew he was nothing to her, his heart began to beat in a strange, uncomfortable way, when he found himself in such close proximity to the woman he so dearly loved. Unconsciously his eyes turned full upon her face, and as they rested there, an expression of absorbing love came into them.

Dolly was fully occupied in tying a small knot in the elastic of her white sailor hat, and she was quite unconscious of that ardent glance; but Lady Francis Fairsmore's dark eyes were fixed on George's face; and the woman who loved him better than life itself could not help the sudden pang of pain, which cut so cruelly into her heart at the sight of it.

From his face her glance went straight to Dolly's, and then wandered far away into the distance, over the hill-tops beyond the valley.

CHAPTER XX.

AT SALTCLIFF.

'And the boy that walked beside me,
He could not understand,
Why closer in mine, ah! closer,
I pressed his warm soft hand.'
LONGFELLOW.

'WELL, here I am!' exclaimed George, on entering Lady Francis Fairsmore's sitting-room at the Saltcliff Hotel, about a fortnight later on. There was a broad smile on his face, and a well satisfied expression in his eyes, as he made this announcement; then he shook hands violently with both Lady Francis and Dolly, in his usual hearty fashion.

When he entered the room, Dolly had been gazing listlessly out of the window, and Lady Francis writing letters. As usual, he seemed to bring a rush of life in with him.

'Where is my father?' inquired Dolly, after the first few words of greeting were over.

'Such a bore, Dolly,' returned George. 'The Squire cannot come until to-morrow morning. He was detained at the last moment by some business matters. However, he is coming down here by an early train.'

'Poor Dads! What a bore for him!' murmured Dolly. 'And he does hate business so, poor dear.'

Just at this moment Lady Francis's footman, Thomas, entered the room, and announced 'Mr Robert Netherley,' and a moment or two later that gentleman entered the room, and proceeded, in a manner half nervous and half consequential, to explain his unexpected appearance upon the scene.

'I happened to have a couple of days to spare, and hearing from the Mudcombes that you were here, thought I would look you up,' he remarked to Lady Francis, as he shook hands with her. 'I have been to the Naval

Review, and am now paying a round of visits—go to the Mudcombes again on Monday; but I found I could manage a couple of days, so ran down here to see how you were getting on,' and as he spoke, Mr Netherley's eyes wandered from Dolly's expressive face to the young man who stood beside her. He had certainly not expected to find Lord Ventnor at Saltcliff, and he was far from pleased to see him there.

While he made this elaborate speech, Dolly stood by the window, and tapped her finger-tips noiselessly, but somewhat impatiently, against a table near her.

'I am sure we are very glad to see you, Bob,' replied Lady Francis, with forced politeness. And there was no doubt about it, her tone was cold.

'Thanks, Fanny!' returned he, quite unconscious that his presence was unwelcome, and meanwhile shaking hands with Dolly with effusion. 'You see I am at a loose end. Gaythorne is as dull as ditch-water now that my people are away.'

'I quite understand,' replied Lady Francis, with a slight satirical smile, and in a manner that caused Mr Netherley to glance suspiciously at her—a glance unflinchingly returned.

'I am sure we ought to thank you for sparing us a few hours of your very valuable time. You pay us a great honour,' put in Dolly, upon mischief intent, and with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

Mr Netherley, however, was not the man to understand chaff. He regarded Dolly gravely for several seconds, and then murmured, 'Not at all!' rather awkwardly.

'And now I suggest that we go for a stroll on the sands. There is nearly an hour before tea-time!' exclaimed Lady Francis cheerfully, and so turned the conversation. As she spoke, she smiled reprovingly at Dolly, and seized a moment when her cousin's back was turned in which to shake her head at her.

Lady Francis's suggestion was, of course, carried out; and a few minutes later the quartette were walking rather quickly down the cliffs in the direction of the sea.

George and Dolly went on first, and Lady Francis and

her cousin followed them in the distance. Mr Netherley did not approve of this plan; and the manner in which her little ladyship dawdled, as they walked along, was extremely irritating to him.

'You do not like that man,' asserted George, as soon as they were safely out of hearing.

'Oh, he rather amuses me than otherwise—as long as I only see him at long intervals,' Dolly laughingly asserted. 'Only, on the other hand, that kind of thing cannot fail to rub one up the wrong way. One is not used to it.'

'He is fairly consequential,' agreed George, in a would-be lenient tone of voice. 'That is all.'

'I beg your pardon, my dear; that is not all. The man is not a gentleman; that is the beginning and end of the matter,' replied Dolly drily.

'Why, the Gaythornes are one of the oldest families in Gayshire,' remonstrated George.

'But their heir is by no means singular in not being a nature's gentleman, George. One cannot explain it, but those cases are often to be met with.'

'Yes, so they are,' assented George meditatively.

'And yet, once, when I did a most unfortunate thing, and made some abominably rude remarks about his relations, he took it as well as you could have done, George. It is only sometimes that he appears to such disadvantage. I do not think he is a bad man at the bottom,' Dolly returned relentingly. 'Do not let us be too hard upon him, just because he has rather bored us by coming here, and annoyed us by explaining his motives for doing so in a gauche and foolish manner.'

You quite realise that he means to offer himself and Gaythorne to your notice?' inquired George, after a slight pause.

'Why, yes,' replied Dolly drily. 'And I really think I must let him get it over. Hints are quite thrown away upon him.'

'Poor chap!' remonstrated George, half commiseratingly, and half amused.

'Not at all. It will only touch his self-conceit. He will not die of a broken heart this time,' laughed Dolly.

and then she coloured faintly, remembering that scene in London not so very long ago.

Ever since then George had been his own old self to her, and never once had he given her any reason to suppose that he even recollected what had taken place that evening. But still Dolly naturally could not quite put it aside. She knew that as well as being her best friend he was also her lover.

'No. I do not think he will take much harm,' agreed George, a trifle contemptuously.

Ten minutes later Mr Netherley had captured Dolly; and much to Lady Francis's annoyance, had marched away with her at a rattling pace along the Saltcliff Sands.

This was certainly very far from being what Lady Francis had intended, when she had proposed going out of doors; and she turned to glance up at George and see how he was taking it, as she walked beside him in the wake of the truant couple.

George apparently was taking it very complacently, and he smiled quite jovially at Lady Fanny upon meeting that expressive upward glance.

'Your cousin seems to admire mine,' he observed, with an amused smile.

'I am afraid he does,' replied her little ladyship, rather impatiently, 'it is very silly of him.'

'I cannot agree with you there,' returned George quietly. 'I think he displays excellent taste in doing so.'

'Oh, of course, I did not mean that, Lord Ventnor,' explained Lady Francis quickly. 'Only he ought to see—I mean, it is ridiculous of him to suppose that any good can come of it.'

'Shall we sit down here while our respective cousins settle that question for themselves?' suggested George very quietly. 'There is no use in our hurrying after them like this, is there?'

'I suppose not,' she replied, half doubtfully. 'But surely you do not think he will be so foolish as to—say anything to her?'

'I would not answer for him. He looked dangerous,' replied George. 'But will you not sit down?'

Upon this Lady Francis sat down upon the projecting rock which he had brought before her notice, and in another minute George Ventnor had seated himself beside her.

'Oh, he surely could not be so foolish,' continued Lady Fanny pensively, after a pause.

George started perceptibly. He had forgotten Mr Robert Netherley's very existence by that time. 'Oh, Netherley!' he exclaimed, after glancing absently into her face for several seconds. 'Never mind him, Lady Francis, my cousin can take very good care of herself, and yours must take his chance—like the rest of us.'

After that there was another, still longer, pause, during which these two young people—for after all they were not so very old, in spite of Lady Fanny's matronly little ways, and George's philosophy—sat quietly side by side, apparently absorbed in a deep contemplation of the scene before them.

The tide was going out and the waves came rushing in almost to their feet, and then went flowing out again, each time a little further from them than the last. From the huge cliff behind them, out into the far distance, the scenery at that part of the coast was magnificent. Rock after rock jutted out ruggedly at all corners of the bay; and, to add to the grandeur of it all just then, the sea was very rough, the waves all white capped, and the sea-gulls were flying close down to them, in a manner which spoke of a coming storm.

And meanwhile a storm of quite a different nature was already raging in the breast of the woman who was sitting so quietly beneath the cliff, close to young Lord Ventnor's side.

Fanny Fairsmore was a woman of the world, in spite of the fact that in some ways she was extremely unworldly, and she knew that now that George Ventnor had gone so far as to say, 'like the rest of us,' he meant to go further. Instinct told her that he was going to make a confidant of her. She would have liked to be spared that if possible, but she did not see how it was to be managed. Of course she could abruptly have broken in

upon his reverie, and begun to converse flippantly about something else, like any other clever woman would have done, but that was not Lady Fanny's way. She could never talk flippantly when her friends were grave and troubled, even when it was for their own good, and as to doing so merely to avoid a little private trouble upon her own part, that was unlike Lady Francis.

She was conscious that she had unwillingly brought matters to their present state, and she was quite prepared to bear the result of her own short-sightedness; only she could not help feeling troubled, and wishing it was over.

Many women would have hailed such a situation as this with triumph, would have worked perseveringly to bring just such a situation about, and would have turned it to good account. To them it would have been a stepping-stone by which to attain endless *tête-à-têtes*, other confidences, a great Platonic friendship, and, in the end, that love which they had undermined and reconstructed so prettily and nattily to suit themselves.

Give men their due, but still one fact remains; in the hands of a really clever and beautiful woman, there are no greater fools than they are. But Lady Fanny was not at all beautiful—far from it; and as to being clever in such a way as this, she was not at all. Lady Francis was loyal and true, and straightforward to a high degree, and unless she could gain anything by fair means, it would be lost to her for ever. And so she quietly waited for George's next remark, feeling very troubled and ill at ease.

Suddenly he looked up at her from a picture which he had been drawing on the sands beneath them with his stick.

'You know how much I care for her?' he said abruptly. 'Of course you must have noticed that.'

'Yes, I know,' she replied softly.

'And you are a great friend of hers, are you not, Lady Fanny? You understand her thoroughly?' he continued, in the same abrupt, awkward manner.

'As thoroughly as one woman ever does understand another, I believe,' replied Lady Francis, suddenly upon

her guard. 'I am not in her confidence about this, if that is what you mean. Dolly is not like that, you know.'

'Oh no, I know she is not like that,' he returned gravely; 'but I want to know, between ourselves, do you think I have the very smallest chance—after a time?'

And as he spoke he began to draw another picture upon the sands. This time it was the picture of a very curiously-shaped pig.

She was glad he was not looking at her, and her eyes wandered downwards until they rested upon the pig, and, taking an interest in the pig, she forgot to answer him for several seconds.

'I hope you have, Lord Ventnor,' she replied at last, very earnestly; 'and I really think that, if only you are patient enough, it will all come just as you wish in time.'

'I shall be as patient as Job,' he returned quietly; 'but I am afraid that it is not possible that she can ever care for me. Why should she?' he demanded, almost bitterly, after a slight pause.

Lady Fanny for several seconds did not answer that abrupt question. She seemed to be questioning George's curious pig as to how she must reply, for she studied it very gravely, and with apparent absorption.

'Now, you must see for yourself, Lady Francis, that there is nothing in a plain, common-place fellow like me at all likely to attract a woman,' he continued, in a would-be reasoning and matter-of-fact tone of voice.

Again Lady Francis Fairsmore studied the pig.

'You are too kind and civil to like to agree with me.'

'But it is truth, is it not?' he persisted, after another pause.

'I think you are talking nonsense, Lord Ventnor,' she replied very quietly. 'And I certainly do not agree with you.'

'You see I am so very plain, to begin with,' argued George meditatively.

'Are you?' she questioned simply, glancing up at him in a surprised manner. 'I never realised it before.'

'But you realise it now,' he returned briskly. 'I wish I was better-looking. I think she admires handsome men.'

'And I am quite sure that she admires you more than any other man in all the world,' returned Lady Francis, with conviction. 'If you are patient, I believe it will all end—the right way.'

'Thank you,' murmured George, with a strange little catch in his voice that hurt her; and then he began to draw another pig, still more curious than the first.

Neither of them had mentioned the possibility of there being someone else in the question. Neither of them would have dreamt of doing so. And yet they mutually realised, by this time, that the other was aware of this unpleasant fact.

'It is a great comfort to me to think that you believe I have a chance, Lady Fanny,' George continued gravely. after having dotted in the eye of his last artistically-drawn animal.

He was still stooping over his stick; and, as he spoke, he glanced up at her from under the brim of his hat, which was tilted just now rather forward over his eyes.

He was surprised to notice that she was looking bo white and tired.

'What is the matter?' he exclaimed kindly. 'Is it too windy here for you? You look awfully seedy.'

'I am quite well, Lord Ventnor, thank you,' she replied quietly. 'Go on, please; never mind me.'

'Oh, but I do mind you!' he returned warmly. 'You are the best and kindest woman in the world.'

For a second Lady Fanny looked steadily out seawards and then she turned and smiled at him. 'That is a very pretty compliment,' she returned lightly; 'and I am glad you think me worthy to be her friend.'

'The best friend any girl could positively have, or any man either, for the matter of that,' he said enthusiastically.

'And Dolly is such a dear, charming, attractive girl,'

returned Lady Francis quickly, as if afraid to dwell upon dangerous ground. After that there was a long pause.

'She is the only woman I shall ever marry, Lady Fanny,' George began thoughtfully at last. 'I think I always loved her from the very first,—when she was quite a little child. I could never love—or marry—any other woman. If it was for her own good, I would let her go without a murmur. But—I wish—it might be—that she could fancy me—that some time or other she might change her mind.'

And again there was a strange break in George's voice. A little, curious, shaky sound, which touched the woman who sat beside him to the heart. A small gloved hand was suddenly laid upon his arm in a sympathethic, impulsive manner. In another second that hand was clasped in his, and these two were sitting hand in hand, mutually comforting each other, and quite unconscious that there was anything at all remarkable in the situation.

At last Lady Francis quietly drew her hand away. Silence still reigned supreme; and George commenced his third pig. He luckily was fond of drawing pigs, and, as he worked away at this one, bestowing more care and finish upon it than he had given to the preceding two, Lady Fanny, leaning back against the projecting rock behind her, contrived to surreptitiously dispose of two obtrusive little tears, which, in a quite annoying manner, had found their way into her large brown eyes.

And then Mr Netherley and Dolly came walking back towards them—even faster than they had gone away.

One thing was apparent at first glance—something had seriously upset Mr Robert Netherley's usual well-satisfied equilibrium.

Neither George nor Lady Francis were therefore at all surprised, when, after tea was over that same evening, Mr Netherley suddenly announced that he found he had made a mistake as to his dates, and that he was due at Mudcombe that evening—in fact, ought to have been there yesterday, and that, as he was afraid he was already in hot water with the duchess, there was nothing for it except his starting off at once.

Nobody suggested that midnight would not be a desirable time to arrive at Mudcombe, or that he was unlikely to appease the duchess by arriving at that hour; and, very shortly after this announcement, he departed.

As soon as he had gone, George gave a low, long whistle, and observed laughingly to Dolly, 'Nothing under a duchess could possibly have consoled him.'

Both women laughed at this remark; but no sooner had he made it, than he remembered that the object of it was Lady Francis Fairsmore's cousin. He coloured furiously.

'Now, do not be uneasy, George,' exclaimed Dolly; 'Fanny does not love him.'

'No, indeed, Lord Ventnor, he is no favourite of mine. I quite echo your sentiment, I assure you,' Lady Fanny hastened to assure him.

'Oh, but that is lucky, though,' said George drily, with a big sigh of relief; 'what an ass I am!'

CHAPTER XXI.

A TELEGRAM.

'And one dies about midnight, and the wind moans and no other.'—JEAN INGELOW.

IT was the middle of the day, and four people were sitting at luncheon in a large room overlooking the sea in the Queen Hotel at Saltcliff.

All the morning they had been wandering about upon the sands, chiefly occupied in the combined efforts of seeing who could throw stones the farthest out into the sea, and in avoiding the Saltcliff visitors and natives. This hardly sounds amusing, but then, as we all know, happiness does not consist in what we do so much as in whom we do it with, and these four people were very

kindred spirits. Somehow, the morning had slipped very quickly and pleasantly by, and everyone had been quite surprised when George had pulled out his watch, and announced that it was half-past one.

It was the fashion of the Saltcliff world to have luncheon punctually at one o'clock, and the streets were delightfully empty as our quartette hurried through them homewards. This gave the Squire such a favourable impression of the place, which he saw for the first time, that he announced quite cheerfully that he thought he 'could put up with it for a day or two.'

But no sooner had he settled himself comfortably by Lady Francis' side at the luncheon-table than 'John,' who filled the combined position of footman and valet to the Squire, entered the room and handed a telegram upon a salver to him.

The Squire opened it, glanced casually at it, and then suddenly coloured painfully, and became very serious. This was what he read:—

'*Come to Areley Court at once. Fred is very ill.*
'*Florence.*'

By this time everyone had realised that something was wrong. Then all was hurry and confusion; everyone helping as best they could to assist Dolly and the Squire to make the earliest possible start.

This, of course, broke up the party. Lady Francis, not caring to stay alone at Saltcliff, returned to Faircroft, George accompanying her as far as Muddleton, on his way back to Ventnor Castle.

Frederick Areley was truly very ill—so ill, indeed, that very soon after that telegram was sent, and long before the Squire and Dolly were even in the train which bore them south, the end had come, and Dolly's sister was a widow. No one had suspected that anything was wrong with Fred Areley's heart; but for all that there had been something very wrong indeed with it, and that first seizure had carried him away.

It was early on the morning of the following day when

Squire Vernon and his second daughter found themselves standing on the platform of the small station, which lay about two miles from Areley Court. And it was there that they first heard the news of the sudden death which had taken place the previous evening.

It was only five o'clock when the wheels of the carriage which had met them at the station rolled homewards along the principal drive in Areley Park. All was as still as that death which had overtaken the young master of the place, and, in spite of the freshness of the early morning air, a heavy gloom seemed to hang over the grey old house as they approached it.

The large tower clock struck five as they passed under the archway and entered the courtyard; and both the Squire and Dolly started involuntarily at that sudden noisy break in the intense and oppressive silence which surrounded them. A minute or two later and the great entrance-door swung open, and the footmen came running down the steps to open the carriage door and help them out. On their faces was a subdued expression of grief,—which, perhaps, the fact that they had been up all night rendered it easy for them to carry out without much simulation. Their master had not been a popular man. Tyrannical, over-bearing, fault-finding, and extremely bad-tempered he had been by nature, and lately these failings had grown almost insufferable. Old Johnson, the butler, who received them in the hall, was nevertheless honestly cut up by his master's sudden death. He had known him since his childhood, having been a faithful servant at the Court in his father's lifetime. In spite of many a rub, much abuse, and many a curse, the old man had held on to his place, and had, through it all, bestowed much affection on Mr Frederick. And now that he was gone, the old man really felt it sorely; and, as Dolly remembered often afterwards, he was the only human being who bestowed any real regret or sorrow for that young life which, with all its faults and all its individual interests, had so suddenly passed away into that vast eternity, which the best amongst us know so little of, and which, alas! to poor Fred Areley, had been a dark

and gloomy prospect, which he had never permitted his mind to dwell upon, and of which he had hoped his further knowledge would be postponed until all his interest in his present life had ceased.

Breakfast was waiting for the travellers in the dining-room; and, hearing that Mrs Areley was in bed, and it was believed asleep, Dolly and her father went straight there, and were presently warming themselves by the fire, which Johnson, with much forethought, had ordered to be lit in the large open grate.

Neither of them had cared much for Frederick Areley, and neither of them had very often been at Areley Court before. Florence's ways were not their ways, and the guests who had overrun the house had not been people the Squire had found congenial to himself, or had thought desirable companions for his second daughter.

But, notwithstanding all this, they were neither of them in the humour to settle down to a somewhat sumptuous breakfast an hour after hearing of their respective son-in-law and brother-in-law's sudden death. They were both feeling deeply for Florence, and were anxious and uneasy about her. Besides, that gloom which, with death, always enters a house, was resting over them, and they both felt depressed and nervous.

And as they stood thus by the fire, the door burst open, and a dark-haired, delicate-looking boy rushed into the room.

'Here you are!' he exclaimed boisterously. 'We've been expecting you! I would get up, although Fowler kicked up an awful shindy about it! How do you do, grandpapa? How are you, Aunt Vera?'

At this 'grandpapa' gravely shook hands with Florence's little son, who, although only four years of age, had all the airs of a man of the world. Harry Areley had been reared in a forcing bed (metaphorically speaking), and reared about as badly in that forcing bed as he well could have been; and the result of it was that he was not a child, but a monstrosity.

Monstrosity or not, Aunt Vera, thus casually addressed, turned and took him affectionately in her arms and kissed

him. Harry, however, was neither used to be taken affectionately in ladies' arms nor kissed; and the process did not wholly please him. After it was over, he stroked his short black hair with his little hands, tidied his collar, and then, that done, evidently felt himself again.

'You know that my papa is dead?' he went on quite cheerfully. 'Isn't it funny? I am papa now!'

And then, something which he saw in the expression on their faces stopped him, and he became silent.

'Yes, Harry dear, we know,' replied Dolly gently, after a long pause. 'You must be a very good boy indeed, now, if you are going to be like your father; mustn't you, dear?'

'But my papa wasn't good, Aunt Vera! Fowler says he was a bad, disagreeable man,' remonstrated the child, with evident surprise.

'Oh, hush, child!' exclaimed Dolly, horror-stricken, while her father turned to contemplate his grandson in dismayed surprise. Neither of them noticed that a tall, handsome woman had entered the room, and was standing behind them, silently watching them, with an expression that was half cynical and half amused upon her lips.

It was Florence Areley, clad in a most elaborate tea-gown of white silk and gold embroidery—her hair coiled artistically in the very latest fashion, and her manner perfectly and irritatingly cool and self-possessed. There was no trace of recent grief, or even of recent discomfort, about her.

'I am afraid you have had a very horrid journey,' she remarked sweetly, in a mild, apologetic manner. 'I would not have wired had I known. We never expected that the end was so near, and he wished to see you.'

They both turned hastily round when thus addressed, and long before she had finished speaking they had arrived at the same conclusion; this calmness was not forced, or rather, it was forced, for underneath it lay no sorrow and no regret. Then followed an awkward moment or two, during which both the Squire and Dolly wondered what they had better say or do next, under the present circumstances; a question which Flor-

ence solved for them by stepping forward, and offering a cool, slightly rouged, and highly-scented cheek for them to kiss.

'Oh, Florence dear, I am so sorry!' murmured Dolly, as she put her firm young arms round her sister and kissed her affectionately; and the Squire took his daughter's hand in both his own and pressed it closely, saying nothing.

'Very sad, is it not? Poor Fred! I shall miss him terribly,' murmured poor Fred's widow, with a little sigh. 'But,' she added quietly, 'I must not think of that yet, or I shall break down; and there are so many things to be seen to.'

Neither the Squire nor Dolly made any comment upon this conventional tribute to poor Fred Areley's memory; and presently Mrs Areley extricated her hand from the grasp in which her father, half unconsciously, still retained it, and walked quietly towards the breakfast-table.

'I am sure you must be hungry,' she remarked hospitably; and as she spoke she took up her position at the head of the table. 'Coffee or tea, Dolly?' she asked briskly, as if desirous to rouse her sister into action.

'Tea, thank you,' replied Dolly, instantly moving forwards.

Then they began to eat that early breakfast, while Master Harry kicked about in a large arm-chair near the fire, and his mother quietly presided over the coffee and tea-pots.

'I am so sorry you came down, Florence,' said Dolly, presently. 'I had hoped you were asleep.'

'I could not sleep, Dolly,' was the quiet, almost reproving answer. 'And I was longing to see you both. So I thought no one would think it odd if I came down to meet you.'

'Oh, no, Florence; why should they? And who is there to "think" at all about it?' exclaimed Dolly, surprised.

'One cannot be too careful at a time like this. The servants repeat things so,' explained Mrs Areley coolly.

Dolly's big grey eyes unconsciously opened very wide

and she glanced at her sister in blank dismay. Then she quietly proceeded to butter a piece of toast, and dropped her attempt at keeping up the conversation.

Vera had never known much about her brother-in-law; and what little she had known, she had not liked. On the rare occasions when they had met, he had been in the habit of paying her compliments, commenting upon her beauty, and making himself obnoxious to her in many little ways. His fast ways and his open admiration, although some people would have called them very harmless, had grated terribly upon the girl, whose refined nature had revolted indignantly against them. She had tried to like her sister's husband; and she had ignominiously failed. But sitting now at the table he had but yesterday sat at and called his own, and looking at the woman and the boy who but yesterday had been his wife and child, a great rush of tenderness and pity came into her warm and sympathetic heart, and a sudden closing in her slender little throat caused her to leave that piece of carefully-buttered toast uneaten, and to rise suddenly and retire to a distant window to admire the view.

The sun was just beginning to pierce through the grey gloom, and suddenly the glories of a summer's early morning burst forth and smiled at her. But there was no smile to meet it upon Dolly's face, and two large tears rolled slowly down her cheeks, and dropped silently upon the highly-polished floor upon which she stood.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SUMMER'S EVENING AT VENTNOR CASTLE.

'Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act that each to-morrow
Finds us further than to-day.'

TEN months have gone by, somewhat uneventfully, since we left Vera with her father and sister in the house where young Frederick Areley, uncared for and unmourned, save by one faithful old servant and one tender-hearted girl, lay in that last, long eternal sleep which had come to him so suddenly in the very prime of life.

It was evening. A perfect summer's evening. Still warm, and with that touch of languor in the mild night air which so often follows in the wake of an unusually hot day. It was yet so early in the summer season that the pure fresh growth and verdure of spring were still untainted, and in fullest perfection. It was essentially one of those evenings, in fact, on which, if one is not sitting out-of-doors in some quiet, pleasant country garden, one at anyrate ought to be doing so.

There had been a dinner party at Ventnor Castle, and all the guests had strolled out through the open windows of the drawing-room, and were either walking about the garden, or sitting upon the benches on the lawn. All save two people, and those two sat side by side upon the steps which lead up to one of those large open windows.

And one of these two people was a very small and very picturesque old lady, whose snow-white hair was half-concealed behind a soft lace cap. Her dress was of the very neatest order possible, being a long, plainly-hanging, black velvet skirt, and a high-necked, long-sleeved bodice, full ruched, old-fashioned way, round the neck and wrists with some rare old lace. The only ornaments she wore were a couple of very beautiful rings, the one set with sapphires and the other with diamonds; and there was

the very calmest and sweetest expression on this very charming old lady's face, than one could ever hope to see on any human being's; and as to her voice, it was so low and so musical, that its tones fell upon the soft night air like the echo of some distant chant.

A very old-fashioned little lady in some ways was Mrs Coningham, in spite of the fact that, for her son's sake, she was still very well known in society, and led anything but a secluded life. Not that George's mother was really old —for her hair was far whiter than is at all usual at her years, which, in reality, hardly number threescore,—but rather because, reared by a mother whose chief object in her life had been the care of her husband and the training of children, and by a father whom she had been in the habit of addressing as 'Sir,' the spirit of the courteous, good old times seemed still to hover over her.

Be that as it might, Mrs Coningham was a very ideal mother, and it was not without just cause that young Lord Ventnor thought her so.

And her present companion? A tall, slender girl, dressed in white, with a large bunch of *gloire de Dijon* roses fastened in the low bodice of her dress.

Dolly Vernon sat for some time—longer than she was at all aware of, indeed—very quietly and silently by Mrs Coningham's side, and as she sat there that lady surreptitiously watched her face.

The girl's eyes, all the while, were fixed thoughtfully and sadly upon the scene before her, seeing nothing of its beauty,—and it was a beautiful scene, long, sloping lawn, magnificent old trees, whose branches fell down to the very edge of a large picturesque lake, and then beyond that lake, hill after hill, one above another, far away into the distance, here opening out and showing a peep of the distant wooded view beyond, and there closing up and towering nearly out of sight into the sky.

And the face of the young girl who looked upon all this with unseeing eyes was overclouded by a far-away, troubled expression, which the woman beside her did not like to see upon so young a face.

'Dolly, dear child,' she said at last, very softly, 'what are you thinking about?'

'Oh, I beg your pardon, Aunt Lilian!' hastily apologised Dolly, waking with a start from an unpleasant dream, and suddenly becoming conscious of the fact that for perhaps five minutes she had quite forgotten her companion's very existence.

Mrs Coningham was not her aunt—she was only her cousin by marriage—but she had always called her Aunt Lilian since her childhood.

'I do not want you to beg my pardon, Dolly. I want to know why you were looking so unhappy,' was the firm but very gentle answer.

'Was I looking unhappy?' questioned Dolly evasively.

'Yes, dear,' was the decided reply.

'Then it was very wrong of me. I have no right or cause to do so,' protested Dolly.

'We cannot command our happiness at will,' returned George's mother. 'You certainly ought to be a very happy girl, dear, but you are not.'

'I really think I am,' said Dolly, thoughtfully.

'I wish I could think so also, Dolly,' returned Mrs Coningham, 'but I cannot. There is some trouble hanging over you; it has been troubling you for some time past now. Cannot I help you, Dolly?' she continued earnestly.

'I am afraid not, Aunt Lilian,' replied Dolly quietly.

'Cannot this trouble be removed?'

'It seems not,' was the somewhat dry and bitter answer. 'Such as it is, I am afraid it will remain. There seems to be no getting rid of it, or away from it.'

The hour and the twilight, and her old friend's sympathy, had opened her lips thus far upon a forbidden subject, but hardly were they closed before she gave an impatient sigh, and wished much that she had not spoken.

'I am sorry, so sorry, darling,' whispered the voice beside her; 'but I feared it was so. I do not ask you what this trouble is. If it had been thought best to tell me, it would have been told me long ago. But, Dolly, I

fear, dear child, that it is standing between my poor boy and his best chance of happiness.'

By this Dolly divined that Mrs Coningham was fairly far-seeing. As to whether George, if he could have heard her, would have cared to be called a poor boy, and pitied even by so charming an old lady as his mother, was another question. Few people, except ladies with imaginary grievances, appreciate the expression of that feeling which is supposed to be akin to love. George, being a man, probably would not have been best pleased could he have heard his mother thus expressing herself to Dolly. At anyrate, this was Dolly's opinion of the case, and not quite knowing what to say about it all, she remained silent.

'Do not think me selfish, dear, in thus thinking first of him,' continued Mrs Coningham, after a short pause. 'He is all that is left to me now, and that I love him very dearly is only natural. He is so good, so true, in all his thoughts and deeds. There, Dolly! I have been praising my own belongings, a thing to be avoided; but you know all about it. And you love him, dear—I know that.'

'I certainly love him very much, Aunt Lilian. I think with you that there is nobody like him in the world,' was the simple, if evasive, answer.

'And yet things have been different lately between you,' murmured Mrs Coningham regretfully. 'I know how to interpret that, of course; but it has troubled me greatly. I am afraid I always took it for granted that everything would go smoothly. George deserves that things should go smoothly with him. And you are the—wife, I hoped—I mean, dear Dolly, you are a dear, good girl, and I know you would have made his life a happy one.'

Of course all this, if George ever had a chance with Dolly, was extremely imprudent; but then women, when they take to either match-making or interfering in other people's affairs, generally are imprudent, and Mrs Coningham, charming as she was, could hardly be expected to be an exception to the rule.

'You are quite mistaken about me, Mrs Coningham! I am not at all good,' replied Dolly, rather bitterly.

'Who told you that?' inquired Mrs Coningham quietly.

'I know it myself,' said Dolly.

'Then I am afraid, my dear, that you are out of health, People who are below par often take these fancies. I do not take high-flown views of things myself, Dolly. None of us are perfect, we all know that; but, in my humble opinion, if people are honest and truthful, and charitable in word and deed, and if they do their best to make those around them happy, then I call those people good,' the older woman answered in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone of voice.

'Yes; and supposing people bring nothing but trouble to those who love them—what then, Aunt Lilian?'

'Sometimes people do so because it is their misfortune, and sometimes because it is their fault.'

'It is always a fault to do a wrong thing—and sometimes a misfortune also,' returned Dolly quietly.

'My dear child, you may have unintentionally done something wrong—intentionally, I do not believe you capable of it,' protested George's mother.

She really loved Dolly Vernon, and she thought very highly indeed of her. As to this desponding humour of Dolly's, she did not quite understand the meaning of it; but, like a sensible woman, she considered it unnatural in so young a girl, and she meant to do her best to rouse her out of it. 'Probably,' she mused, 'the girl has got a headache.' But then, if that was so, Dolly must have had a chronic headache going on for nearly a year; and if so, the sooner it was cured the better.

And now that she came to think of it, perhaps Dolly had merely refused George because she, in this low state of health, had taken some idea into her head that she ought to devote her life to her father. Perhaps she loved George, and that was what was troubling her. That Dolly had refused George, Mrs Coningham was certain—both from Dolly's manner and George's.

A short time ago it had seemed to George's mother, that probably some undesirable *parti* was at the bottom of it all, but now she thought it might be something much less difficult to deal with.

'I never knew before that there was much difference between one kind of wrong or another, provided the result of it was the same,' replied Dolly cynically.

'Then, my dear child, you have more to learn than I imagined,' was the brisk reply.

'I certainly have much to learn, Aunt Lilian. The only thing I cannot see my way to ever learning, is how one can hate a thing because it is bad. And, of course, as long as one cannot hate evil, then one is bad one's self.'

Mrs Coningham glanced curiously at the pure, fair face of the girl who was speaking—speaking in a low, hurried voice, with her eyes cast down, and her slender fingers clenched nervously together.

'Dolly, are you not magnifying things a little?' she asked gently, when Dolly had thus denounced herself. And as she spoke, Mrs Coningham laid her hand lovingly upon the girl's white arm.

'Not the least in the world.'

For several seconds after this decided answer Mrs Coningham was silent. After all, probably Dolly's troubles were centred in some love affair—some love affair which her father disapproved of. If so, Mrs Coningham thought she had much better sift the matter to the bottom, and see what she could make of it. Men never really understand women; and, excellent a father as the Squire was, he might be quite unable to deal with a case like this.

'I conclude, Dolly, that this all refers to some gentleman?' said Mrs Coningham presently. 'Because possibly he may not be a desirable husband for you, are you not being rather hard upon him in calling him an evil thing?'

'You are mistaken, Aunt Lilian. It is not a question of a desirable husband in this case,' was the quiet reply.

'You mean that the case is hopeless?'

'Perfectly.'

'There is some obstacle?'

'There are a great many.'

'But one of them is greater than the rest?' continued Mrs Coningham.

'Yes—perhaps. Oh, yes, in the sense you mean, certainly,' agreed Dolly.

'Cannot it be removed?'

'No.'

'Well, do not get into this low state about it, Dolly. Perhaps it can be removed by-and-by. You can at any rate hope so, child,' ventured Mrs Coningham, who, dearly as she loved Dolly, was still not so wholly unselfish in this as she at first glance appeared to be. She had no wish that George should marry a woman who did not love him; and she was quite certain by this time that Dolly loved some other man.

'Oh, no!' gasped Dolly, taken aback by the suggestion, and in her confusion forgetting all else. 'No!'

And then, in one second, Mrs Coningham divined the truth. She also gasped; but she made no other sign to show that she had made a dreadful, wholly unexpected, and startling discovery. There seemed one, and one only, construction to be put upon that horrified 'no' of Dolly's. Could it be possible that Dolly Vernon, reared as she had been, and good and true, as Mrs Coningham had believed her to be, could possibly have given her heart to some man already bound to some other woman? Oh, surely not! Surely it was quite impossible! Surely it was a too utterly revolting idea which now presented itself! And yet, it seemed the only possible solution to the whole affair.

'And could it be removed, Aunt Lilian, the other obstacles would render its removal utterly unavailing,' continued Dolly, this time passionately. 'I would rather die than—than marry that man!'

'My dear child, if you have arrived at that conclusion about some undesirable individual, I am sincerely glad to hear it,' returned Mrs Coningham quietly; as in duty bound ignoring the fact that she had arrived at a conclusion of her own about the matter, and feeling much relieved at the turn things had now taken. 'And, although of course it must annoy you, and be a humili-

ating thought for you that you bestowed your affection for a passing hour upon an unworthy subject, I really see nothing to so depress you in the matter. Of course, you fell in love with this gentleman before you realised that he was not all he should be, and, although you may have displayed indifferent taste in ever being attracted by him, you are still very young.'

'Yes,' agreed Dolly, very quietly.

'And it is really your duty to lay this grievance aside, and try to think no more of it,' continued the elder woman persuasively. 'A slight misfortune has overtaken you, and you are making too much importance of it.'

'Yes,' again returned the girl, in the same quiet tone; but there was an expression of settled despair upon her face, and Aunt Lilian saw that it was vain to battle with it upon everyday ordinary ground.

'My dear Dolly,' she said gently, after a pause, 'I am going in. The evening is getting chilly, and old folk suffer from rheumatism. But before I go I want to say something to you. I seldom speak as I am speaking to-night, and, while I am speaking, I may as well speak openly and without reserve. For some old grievance of your own, you are making your father an unhappy man, and you are spoiling George's life for him. Why do you steel your heart against him? Why do you not allow yourself to love him?'

'However much I loved him, I would never marry him,' was the very decided and quiet answer. 'And however much I wished to love him, I could never do it,' she added, with a faint sigh.

'On my boy's behalf I have said my say, Vera,' returned Mrs Coningham gravely. 'But on your behalf and your father's, I must say a little more. You are unceasingly troubling yourself and troubling your father, who loves you deeply. It grieves him more than you perhaps can realise to see you grieving as you have been doing lately.'

'Is my—trouble so evident as this?' asked Dolly wearily.

'To your father, yes,' was the decided answer. 'Any one who loves you cannot fail to notice it.'

'And can one lay aside all thought of self so easily?' asked the girl sorrowfully.

'I think it ought not to be difficult,' was the quiet answer. 'I do not like to bring dark shadows across young lives, but sometimes comparisons are not so very odious after all; and I think that if, when you feel inclined to bemoan the hardness of your lot, you would compare it to the misery and suffering and darkness which really exists for the far greater portion of humanity, you would very soon see that, instead of being singularly unfortunate, you are singularly happy in your lot; and you would also see how worse than wrong it is to look at the matter in any other light.'

'I saw all that one day last winter out hunting,' agreed Dolly gently.

'Yes, dear; the young are all apt to be impulsive. A deep enthusiasm often seizes them, and goes as quickly as it comes. But you have good sense, Dolly; think the matter well over again, dear.'

And so saying, Aunt Lilian gently rose and entered the house; meanwhile, Dolly sat quietly where she left her, and made no attempt to join the others.

'If only I could hate him as much as I despise him, I should be a happy woman,' she murmured presently to herself; thus showing that Mrs Coningham's sermon had been thrown away.

We may often view things the right way for ourselves, and when we do so, there is a hope that our convictions will remain with us; but it is seldom, indeed, that the views of others will convince us of anything save the fruitlessness of laying down any course of action for a fellow-creature whose own inmost thoughts we, of course, cannot possibly even vaguely understand.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AND THE PEOPLE WHO ARE THERE.

'For I like you—doesn't it strike you?
Like you more than perhaps I ought.'
WHYTE MELVILLE.

THE moon shot out from behind a clump of chestnut trees, and flooded the whole scene before Dolly's eyes in a weird, white light. And still she sat there alone; half in the full light of the moon, and half in the reflected glare of the lamplight. And Dolly, who was not given to sentimental fancies, now indulged in one. It seemed to her that her life was just like that, one side of it peaceful and natural; the other overshadowed by an obtrusive glaring mistake. For several minutes she allowed her thoughts to ponder upon her lot as it might have been had Jack Denham never crossed her path.

George's position was nothing to her. She looked upon good birth as a *sine quâ non* amongst her friends—in which idea she certainly might have laid claim to originality now-a-days.

She, much as she liked and respected the lower classes, had an almost unreasonable aversion to all the riff-raff which vacillated between that lower class and the one to which she herself belonged; but as to a title, it had no attraction for her whatever; she looked upon it as a trick of either fates or chances, that a man should be born a few years sooner than his brothers, or be an only son. Money she had never known the want of, and therefore she greatly undervalued it. So it was not George's possessions which she was considering. Only a conviction had forced itself upon her, that if any woman ever had a fair chance of earthly happiness, that woman was herself; and it did seem a little hard that she should prefer a bad shadow to a good substance.

But she did prefer it, and she knew that unless she

could be born over again and become a totally different woman, she always would prefer it. She despised Jack Denham, and she despised herself still more for ever having loved him; but she knew that, as long as she lived, she could never love any other man in the same way.

And presently she leant her head against the wistaria growing on the wall behind her, and she smiled to herself a soft, very sad little smile. Why she smiled I cannot tell you; but as she did so the moonlight lit up her upraised face, until it made it look so ethereal in its beauty, that the cold and somewhat cynical man who chanced to see it just then was quite startled by it out of his everyday self.

'Smiling at the commencement of the summer, Miss Vernon? This is too unkind,' remarked this same individual, a moment later, in his usual slow, somewhat languid tone of voice. For, however much he might have been startled by the unexpected expression which he had caught unawares upon the face of the M. F. H.'s daughter, he was far too much a man of the world to let it be supposed that he had seen anything not intended for his sight.

'You ought rather to congratulate me upon being able to smile,' she replied, brightly.

'But it's such awfully hard lines, you know. You're being able to do it just when all the rest of us are so down in our luck.'

'Why, we have already disposed of two months; cannot you cheer up a little now, seeing that there are only four more?' asked Dolly teasingly.

'Can't manage it, even to please you, Miss Vernon,' was the doleful reply.

'Do you not think you could manage it better if you sat down just here?' suggested Dolly soothingly, and patting the fur rug upon which she herself was sitting with her hand as she spoke; 'at any rate, we could talk our grievances comfortably over then.'

'Awfully good suggestion of yours, that, you know,' returned Captain Dasher. 'Thanks! I'll try it.'

Upon this, Dolly drew aside her white silk skirt, and Captain Dasher leisurely took up his position beside her. He did it leisurely, because he had never done anything in a hurry in his life, and because he had an extremely calm and languid nature; but if you have run away with the idea that Captain Dasher was simply an empty-headed, would-be fashionable young man of the present day, you are quite mistaken. There is a great difference between being a thing and pretending to be a thing; and Captain Dasher was a genuine article. What is more, he was an extremely good fellow, as any one in Mudshire would have told you. Nor was he so very young; since, to Dolly's knowledge, he had hunted with the Muddleton for the last ten years. Who can deny that it is these very quiet, apparently languid, rather cynical men, who, if they are soldiers, are the best of soldiers; and if they are sportsmen, are the best of sportsmen? Now-a-days, when every young masher in town, and every shoemaker's son who gets into a smart cavalry regiment, affects this very style, one naturally gets to detest it; but to detest the genuine article because it cannot be patented, is as foolish a proceeding as it would be to object to your dinner because your servants cannot exist without theirs.

As to Dolly's opinion about Captain Dasher, it was a good one. She had known him ever since she used to go out hunting on a small pony. He had been just the same then as now; neither looking a day younger nor a day older. Somewhat dry in his manner, kind-hearted, a most perfect gentleman, and certainly as good a rider as you could ever hope to see. Dolly had always liked him, and he had always liked Dolly. He had even gone so far as to think her a nice little girl when she used to come out on that small pony, and risk her own life, and the upsetting of even his equilibrium under his horse's legs; and that, I think, you will agree, is about as high a test of friendship as any man could possibly bestow upon a fellow-creature.

'So you are not in town this year?' he remarked presently, after a rather long silence.

It had suddenly dawned upon him that he ought to make some observation.

'An original remark, seeing that I am here,' laughed Dolly.

'If you are going to snap me up like that, I shall go away,' he murmured, in an aggrieved tone.

'No, you will not,' returned Dolly, rather naïvely.

'How did you know that? You are awfully clever, Miss Vernon,' he returned gravely.

'I know it,' she replied, in the same tone. Then, in quite a different manner, she inquired brightly, 'And how is Katherine getting on? Enjoying herself immensely, of course.'

'Oh, yes. Katherine is at present in a seventh heaven,' he agreed this time, more dolefully than ever. 'Sixteen engagements for every evening, and credit at the bank until the end of July. At least, I think she will be able to go on till then. You know how we manage? I let her stay until she begins to overdraw, and then I send for her home again at once.'

'A pretty way of putting the case, truly!' retorted Dolly. 'A lucky individual has a devoted sister, who, until she came to live with him, had spent half her life in town, and had led the gayest of gay lives. Individual hunts six days a week, spends his autumn in the north, in a shooting-box terribly remote from civilisation, and thinks a few weeks in town more than enough for him. Devoted sister, an angel, suits herself to his ways, makes herself charming under most adverse circumstances, and only stipulates for a few months in the spring, in which to rub off some of the—'

'Spare me!' laughed Captain Dasher. 'As you are strong, be merciful! And now I have something to tell you.'

'Something to do with Katherine?'

'Something to do with Katherine,' he agreed quietly.

'She—she is not going to be married?'

'That is just it. She is going to be married.'

'Oh, tell me all about it? Who is it?' asked Dolly eagerly. Katherine Dasher was a great friend of hers,

and she really was interested in Captain Dasher's news. So much so indeed, that for the moment she forgot that he would be a decided loser by it.

'Oh, he's one of the Stainburys—Fred Stainbury. He's the second son. A good fellow enough; but it is not a good match for Katherine, you know.'

'I remember him,' returned Dolly thoughtfully. 'A fair, slight young man. I liked him, I think.'

'Yes, he is a good fellow; but all that Goodhaven lot are as poor as church mice,' replied Captain Dasher dolefully. 'However, if Kit's pleased, that is the chief thing. She has got some money of her own luckily, so they need not starve,' he added more cheerfully.

'You will miss her very much,' Dolly remarked presently, in a low thoughtful tone.

'Yes, I shall miss her. Of course I shall miss her!' he agreed quietly. 'But it is what one knew would happen sooner or later. I am glad it is sooner too, honestly. I think on the whole a girl after she is twenty is happier married.'

For several seconds after this remark of Captain Dasher's Dolly remained silent, and then she said quietly,—

'You will have to think of it yourself now.'

'I am not what they call a marrying man, Miss Vernon,' replied Captain Dasher slowly, studying one of his patent leather shoes thoughtfully the while.

'Oh, that is nonsense!' returned Dolly quickly. 'Now think! What will you do with yourself when Katherine has gone? Who will order your dinner, make your house pretty, and make you feel as you ride home, after a long day, that—that you are sure to find a cheery companion and a comfortable home waiting for you?'

'I shall have to dispense with all those luxuries, that is all,' was the very quiet answer.

'But why should you? You will not like it?' returned Dolly protestingly.

'No,' agreed Captain Dasher. 'I shall not like it.'

And something in the way he said it suddenly put into Dolly's head the idea that Captain Dasher had long ago had some disappointment, and that he had not got over it yet. Dolly knew it must have been long ago, she felt sure of that. For ever since she had known him, he had rather avoided ladies' society, and had certainly never had even the shadow of a flirtation going on. Dolly was very sorry that she had said anything upon the subject of matrimony to him now. And she was just wondering how she could best turn the subject, when he spoke again.

'No, I shall not like it,' he continued thoughtfully. 'When one has arrived at the age of five-and-thirty, and one has been looked after by one's sister for several years, solitude has not many charms in it for one. If Katherine had never set up house with me, I daresay I should have jogged on fairly comfortably, as I used to do before she came; but now—now I know I shall not like it.'

'I am afraid you will not,' agreed Dolly, sympathetically, after a short pause.

'Well, I must make the best of it; that is certain,' he returned in a lighter tone. 'For I shall never marry.'

'Never is a long day,' replied Dolly, in a would-be careless tone.

'It does not seem quite so long at thirty-five as it does at nineteen, Miss Vernon,' he returned, with a slight smile.

'You have certainly a very aged and crippled appearance about you. No one would think you were only thirty-five,' said Dolly drily.

'No; and what is more, I am getting into my second childhood!' he returned, half in jest and half in earnest. 'Oh, dear!' he added in abject consternation, 'he is not coming here; is he?'

'Who? Mr Somerset? Oh, surely not! I am not in the humour to talk to people to-night!' exclaimed Dolly rather impatiently.

The man who sat beside her glanced surreptitiously at her as she made this remark; a slight, a very slight,

flush for a second tinted his dark, rather sallow face, and then he answered lightly—

'But he is heading straight this way; that is certain. I fear you must resign yourself to the inevitable.'

'So it seems,' returned Dolly. 'Well, we must endure it. He is not such a very bad young man, poor dear.'

'No; he seems a good sort. But I do not like that other fellow; that Major Mulherson.'

'No; he is simply detestable!' agreed Dolly. 'And what is more, he is following his friend's footsteps. Oh, this is too bad! And when one has a headache too!' she exclaimed, with a little gesture of dismay.

'Have you a headache?' said Captain Dasher; and something in the way he did so startled Dolly so much that she turned suddenly round to look at him. 'I am so sorry,' he added quietly.

'You will see me to the end of this, will you?' whispered Dolly hastily.

'Yes,' he returned quickly.

And then they both looked up at the young man who was by this time close to them.

'Speak of an angel, Mr Somerset,' said Dolly brightly. You know the rest! We were just wondering how you like Muddleton. Not that Muddleton is very charming in itself; but we hope you will like the neighbourhood and the hunting.'

And Dolly smiled so graciously, and her voice was so musical, that an instant conviction that he would like the neighbourhood very much came over Mr Somerset. Now Dolly had spoken in a simple, courteous manner, that had something almost grandmotherly in it. It never struck her that young soldiers were somewhat inflammable, and that a very beautiful girl of nineteen was none the less attractive because she had an old-fashioned and distinctly matronly manner.

'I am sure I shall like both the neighbourhood and the hunting,' returned Mr Somerset gravely; he was rather a grave young man.

'How do you do, Miss Vernon?' exclaimed a tall and strikingly handsome man, who at this moment

joined them; and as he spoke he gazed down at Dolly in an absorbed and appreciative manner. 'I have been admiring your dress, d'ye know, all the evening,' he added, before Dolly could say a word.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DOLLY MAKES A DISCOVERY.

'Tho' oft I've dealt wi' Yorkshire folk,
Yet I was Yorkshire too.'—INGLEDEW.

CAPTAIN DASHER, who had risen to his feet, bestowed a sharp side glance at Major Mulherson upon overhearing him thus addressing the M. F. H.'s daughter, and then he made a few passing remarks in his usual rather cynical way to Mr Somerset.

But, although apparently absorbed in his companion, Captain Dasher was perfectly aware of every word that was being said by Dolly.

'I am afraid that is tantamount to a confession that you have been spending a very dull evening,' returned that young lady quietly. 'Since you have been reduced to admiring a very ordinary dinner dress.'

'That is a nasty one,' mentally observed the crack rider of the Muddleton, with much inward satisfaction; 'a regular facer!'

And in this Captain Dasher was quite right; the words, innocent in themselves, had been said in a very cold and haughty manner. The man to whom they had been addressed was a very thick-skinned individual; but a dull, crimson flush came slowly into his cheeks as he realised that in thus trying to ingratiate himself into the good graces of the Master's daughter, he had made a decided mistake.

What to say next rather puzzled him too. Miss Vernon looked very stiff and very cold; and, beautiful as she was, a conviction that she was not his sort forced itself unpleasantly upon him. Provoking! For Major Mulherson wished to be on good terms with the M. F.

H.'s daughter. He knew that he had been openly snubbed, and he was inwardly raging about it; and as to Captain Dasher, upon whose lips he had detected a slight cynical smile, he already detested him, but he was a thoroughly worldly-wise gentleman, was Major Mulherson, and he had no intention of beginning his career with the Muddleton otherwise than upon good terms with the Master's daughter, and one of the most important members of the hunt. So he choked down the double snub he had just received, and was trying to think what he could say to Miss Vernon that was likely to be approved of by that young lady, when she broke the ice by looking up at him and smiling pleasantly. If Major Mulherson was a man of the world, so was the M. F. H.'s daughter a woman of the world, and although she had a rather quick temper, she also had a fair amount of common-sense.

'We are getting up a little dance the week after next,' she remarked quite affably, 'and I hope you will all feel inclined to help us with it.'

Dolly's smile had a certain fascination in it, and as she looked up at him, Major Mulherson forgot, or rather forgave, her recent snub, and was very sure that he would feel inclined to go to her dance. So was Mr Somerset; and they both assured her that there was nothing they would like better.

'I shall go up to town,' protested Captain Dasher meekly to Dolly, when both the soldiers had had their say.

'Indeed you will not,' she replied quickly. 'Do not hope that I shall permit such a proceeding.'

For a moment Captain Dasher looked down half ruefully at Dolly, and then something which he saw upon Major Mulherson's face changed his whole manner. He had taken an almost unreasonable dislike to this man; and now, in a moment, from being an old and privileged friend of the M. F. H.'s daughter, he became a polished, courteous stranger in his manner of addressing her. Chaff of any sort whatever would not answer in Major Mulherson's presence.

'You would not be so cruel, I hope, Miss Vernon,' he returned gravely. 'You know how I am in reality looking forward to the Wyndeane dance.'

Dolly for a second glanced at her shoes, and no one looking at her quiet, expressionless, downcast face could possibly have suspected how greatly that remark of Captain Dasher's had tickled her fancy. What was it—some lurking love of mischief—which caused Dolly suddenly to look up at the man who had made it, and bestow a very pretty, significant smile upon him—a smile which both Major Mulherson and Mr Somerset of course interpreted but in one way. Mischief, and only mischief, Captain Dasher knew full well; and following her lead (not for the first time), he returned that smile by a quietly comprehensive one. But as he did so, Captain Dasher's face assumed a deeper hue than was quite natural, and after that momentary glance, in which his eyes had met hers in a would-be lover-like manner, he turned his glance suddenly away from her, for several seconds looked steadily at the gravel path beneath his feet, and then fixed his gaze upon the tall figure of his host, which, in the distance, was hovering to and fro amongst the little groups of people on the lawn below.

Then for about five minutes an ordinary conversation—certainly not worth repeating—went on amongst that quartette by the drawing-room window, after which Miss Vernon rose, and in a manner that plainly indicated that she meant to go alone, expressed her intention of going to assist her cousin to entertain some of his less-interesting guests. She explained this to her three companions in a very neatly-worded way, and leaving a pleasant impression, and a lingering regret that she had gone upon the minds of them all, she passed quickly away from them down the long walk towards the lawn.

Left alone, Captain Dasher and Mr Somerset continued a conversation which they had been engaged in before her departure, and Major Mulherson, as he leant against the wall behind him, and lit a cigarette, watched the tall, stately figure of the M. F. H.'s daughter as it moved along.

'That is an uncommonly good-looking girl, let me tell you,' he remarked presently, in a contemplative manner. By this time he had quite forgiven Dolly for the snub she had bestowed upon him, and had even begun to console himself with the thought that it was most probably quite an unintentional one.

'There can be no disputing your opinion,' replied a quiet voice at his elbow, in a manner that far from pleased Major Mulherson.

It was the second time that night that Captain Dasher had raised the Major's ire.

Of course he did not wish to get upon bad terms with the man. Of course Captain Dasher, upon his own ground, would be a valuable friend and a tiresome enemy. Everyone knows the fine airs and self-important manners of the old county members of every existing pack of hounds. The crack rider or the oldest member of any given hunt, when out with his own especial pack of hounds, at any rate in his own eyes, plays quite as important a part in the business as a Cabinet Minister does in the House. He is undoubtedly a very big man, and stamped upon him you will read quite plainly, 'I am lord of all I survey, and my right there is none to dispute.' He is a man whom a wise newcomer will try to conciliate, and whom an unwise one will be certain to find rather irritating to his temper.

Now, as it happened, Major Mulherson was both wise and unwise. He had, as the saying is, 'knocked about the world a good deal,' and he had no intention of picking up a quarrel with Captain Dasher at the very commencement of his career in Mudshire; but, on the other hand, he had taken a distinct dislike to him, and he allowed himself to be highly irritated inwardly by his manner. Nor had Major Mulherson knocked about the world a good deal for nothing. He had not picked up in his wanderings the knowledge of how to appear to be a gentleman, but he had learnt how to notice nearly everything that went on around him, and he had made a discovery on that summer's evening which no one else had ever even dreamt of suspecting.

'She is engaged to Ventnor, is she not?' he inquired, in an apparently unruffled manner. And as he spoke he glanced with a faint smile at Captain Dasher.

'No,' replied that gentleman calmly.

'Oh, not announced, is it not?' continued the other, with a laugh.

'Not yet,' was the quiet reply.

Then Captain Dasher, from being cold and distant, suddenly adopted a more friendly manner. 'But it is what we are hoping for in Mudshire, you know,' he continued, quite confidentially. 'And now, shall we join the others?'

'That is a clever chap,' thought Major Mulherson, as the three men strolled leisurely down the walk together.

'An undeniable cad,' thought Captain Dasher. And so, although he did not suspect it, the gallant Major's fate was already sealed, as far as his popularity in Mudshire went.

But a little knowledge is truly a dangerous thing, and late that night the crack rider of the Muddleton hounds sat smoking a last cigar in his own room, with a very troubled expression upon his face.

'I wish she had not done it!' he murmured to himself; and then, after a long pause, 'but after all it does not matter.' And then, after a still longer pause, 'and do I wish it? No!'

And as he sat there, an expression came into Captain Dasher's face that no one had seen there for a great many years. An expression that only one person had ever seen there before, indeed, and that one a woman.

And now we must return to the time when Dolly Vernon walked down the long walk towards the lawn to join her cousin and his guests. When she arrived there, after addressing a few passing remarks here and there, she finally stopped by the side of a plain, uninteresting-looking girl, who was sitting rather apart from the others alone.

'I expect it is nearly time we went in,' she remarked, genially. 'But before we do so, will you come and look at the lilies in the moonlight? They are well worth seeing.'

'I shall like nothing better,' replied the girl readily.

And so the two walked away briskly side by side; the tall, graceful figure, and regal carriage of the one, contrasting almost grotesquely with the awkward movements and the clumsy make of the other.

The M. F. H.'s daughter was very charming in her manner to her companion as they strolled along the long walk, which was a noted institution at Ventnor, with its broad border of many rows of lilium candidum on either side of it. They were in full perfection just then, and, as Dolly had said, they were well worth seeing. But, perhaps, even better worth seeing than the lilies, was the manner in which the popular, beautiful Miss Vernon treated plain, stupid Ethel Hanley. For now-a-days courtesy to a fellow-being, by the courting of whom nothing can be gained, is certainly very far from being common; and the woman who will sacrifice herself to amuse another woman is even more uncommon still.

By-and-by, when these two returned to the lawn, they found that the others had all gone indoors. So they also wended their way towards the house.

On approaching the drawing-room windows, they discovered two people standing just outside them; one a tall, strongly-built young man, and the other a handsome woman, dressed in black.

And the woman's fine eyes were looking straight up into her companion's face, and there was a soft, curious expression in them that sent an odd sensation tingling through Dolly's veins.

'Why, Dolly, here you are at last. We were just coming to look for you,' exclaimed Mrs Areley, starting forward, upon perceiving her sister, and laying a detaining hand upon her arm.

'Were you, Florence?' was the quiet, rather satirical answer.

'Why, certainly. I was just suggesting to Lord Ventnor that you might have tumbled into the lake,' replied Florence Areley lightly.

Both Dolly Vernon and George Ventnor laughed, and Mrs Areley wondered vaguely why they did so. The

reason was a simple one, although no one would have suspected it, looking at Dolly, and a baby might have done so had it chanced to glance just then at George. They were both feeling unaccountably awkward.

CHAPTER XXV.

DOLLY OBJECTS.

'If you deal with a person whose truth you don't doubt,
Be particular, still, that your bill is crossed out:
But, with any inducement to think him a scamp,
Have a formal receipt, on a regular stamp.'

Ingoldsby Legends.

'WHAT is the matter, Fan?' inquired Dolly Vernon, rather anxiously, about a fortnight later on.

The scene was in the old hall at Wyndeane, the hour about midnight, and these two, dressed in ball attire, were standing alone together by the small fire which, in spite of the season, burnt not unwelcomely in the grate.

'Nothing, Dolly,' replied Lady Francis quietly. 'Only I have a headache, and I came in here for a few minutes' quiet.'

'Oh, I am so sorry, dear,' returned Dolly, sympathetically.

'I shall be all right soon. Your dance is going off capitally.'

'Yes. I think everyone seems cheery,' returned Dolly. 'By-the-bye, have you seen George anywhere? I am looking for him.'

'I can tell you where he is; he is in the pink drawing-room talking to your sister,' exclaimed Mary Grey, who at this moment joined them. 'And,' she added, turning with a smile to a man who stood behind her, 'I want to introduce Mr Danvers to you, Fanny.'

Upon this a sandy-haired, middle-aged man stepped forward, and bowed rather elaborately to Dolly Vernon; and then, perceiving his mistake, turned somewhat awkwardly to Lady Francis.

Dolly for a second or two lingered by the side of Francis Fairsmore, and, before she left, succeeded in making Mr Danvers believe that she had not noticed that mistake, by which he had displayed the fact that he had forgotten that she was the hostess to whom he had been introduced upon his arrival; and then she quickly moved away, leaving them standing alone.

As she wended her way towards the little pink drawing-room, there was a set, determined expression upon her face which boded well for the fulfilment of whatever intention was in her mind just then. Not very long ago Dolly had made a discovery—she had found out Fanny Fairsmore's carefully-guarded secret. And ever since she had been doing her utmost to bring George and Fanny together.

In a business-like way, she walked straight into the pink drawing-room, and up to the sofa upon which George Ventnor and her sister were sitting, and never so much as a glance did she bestow upon the really splendid figure of the woman who, in a black tulle ball-dress, fresh from Worth's, and a liberal display of diamonds, lounged gracefully by George's side. Looking straight into George's face, she announced quietly that she was very sorry to disturb him, but that she was sure Florence would not mind, and she wanted him to come with her to see about something.

Of course this was rather vague, and equally, of course, Mrs Areley, as she watched her partner's red-coated figure disappearing through the doorway, did mind considerably. But those were details quite beneath Miss Vernon's notice.

In the just then deserted passage outside the pink drawing-room Dolly stopped and laughed.

'George,' she remarked quietly, 'this will not do, you know. That sister of mine, I am sorry to see, is an abominable flirt.'

George smiled down into the upraised face so near him; but, although he quite agreed with her, he was too true a gentleman to say so in so many words.

'And she is a little beyond you, my dear boy. So I

am just going to take you under my especial care for the present,' continued Dolly in the same quiet way.

'I have no objection to that arrangement, Dolly,' replied George, with a smile.

'Very well. Then go now and look for Fanny Fairsmore. It is supper-time, I fancy, and I want you to take her under your charge.'

'If I may not stay with you, Dolly, I would rather do that than anything else,' was the ready answer.

'She is the best and the dearest little woman in all the world,' returned Dolly, pleased by this evidently truthful assurance.

'Bar one,' said George.

'Oh, she is a far better woman than I am, George,' returned Dolly gravely.

'Then she must be a very good woman indeed,' was the quiet reply.

Just at that moment Major Mulherson came hurrying down the passage in which they were standing, and upon seeing them, asked Dolly if she could tell him where Mrs Areley was, explaining that she had promised to go down to supper with him.

Dolly, rather stiffly, gave him the required information, and when he had disappeared into the pink drawing-room, she remarked irefully to George,—

'She has no business to go into supper with that man. It is most annoying of her. He is quite conceited enough to begin with,' and then Dolly laughed a little as her eyes met George's. 'She certainly has very variable tastes,' she added, in a half-annoyed, half-amused way.

'Thanks,' returned George quietly; 'I will accept that compliment.'

By which remarks it may be seen that the Major's popularity was not increasing as time went on, and that Mrs Areley did not content herself by flirting with George Ventnor. Late that night, as Dolly stood by her dressing-table brushing that mass of golden hair of hers out of which she had just hurried some diamond stars and a quantity of hair-pins, there came a tap at her bedroom

door, and before she could say 'Come in,' it opened, and her sister entered the room.

'Alone?' she exclaimed, raising her dark eyebrows. Then she closed the door, quickly crossed the room, and seated herself in a low chair close to the dressing-table.

Mrs Areley was still in her ball-dress, and the diamond ornaments upon the bodice of it kept flashing and sparkling in the gaslight in a manner which attracted her sister's notice to the fact that her breath was coming and going considerably quicker than usual.

Neither sister spoke.

Presently the elder of the two took up a silver case from the dressing-table, and began to play rather nervously with a lot of little stud-links which she found inside it.

Dolly laid down her hair-brush and began to make half her hair into a thick soft plait.

Her sister glanced up at her in a slightly impatient manner, and watched the movement of her slender little fingers for several seconds, still in silence.

The fact that Dolly, in her plain white muslin dressing-gown, with her hair flying in wild confusion round her face and shoulders, looked, if anything, more lovely than she had done an hour ago in her ball-dress, irritated Mrs Areley unaccountably, and by way of consolation she glanced from her sister to the reflection of her own figure in the long glass at the other end of the room.

And then at last Mrs Areley smiled; and Dolly, apparently absorbed in her plait, noted that smile and understood it, and her soft, pretty little mouth curled upwards for a moment in a slight contemptuous smile.

As it happened, Mrs Areley was quite as quick-sighted as her sister, and, momentary as that smile was, she saw it.

She had entered the room meaning to try and conciliate Dolly, whom she was fully aware she had displeased.

Mrs Areley thought it very tiresome, that her younger sister should be so easily displeased, and still more tiresome that she should openly display her annoyance. She considered her old-fashioned and prim, and thought

her inclined to be jealous; but she was a little afraid of her. She did not wish to quarrel with her.

Dolly was thoroughly the mistress of the situation, seeing that she was the Mistress of Wyndeane, and that Florence had no intention of leaving Wyndeane at present. And so Florence had intended to try and 'make friends.' But Florence had a rather hot temper, and, seeing that smile, she allowed it to annoy her very much indeed.

'Why do you make a slave of yourself like this, Dolly?' she exclaimed impatiently. 'Why on earth cannot Houghton sit up for you on these occasions?'

'Because, my dear Florence, I do not wish her to do so,' was the very quiet and distinctly annoyed reply.

'It is very silly of you,' retorted Mrs Areley, who did not like such quiet, setting-down sort of answers.

'The girl is delicate,' explained Dolly.

'I should never dream of keeping a delicate maid.'

'I do not think it would be a satisfactory arrangement for you,' returned Dolly serenely.

And it was quite evident that, although in her surprise, for a moment Dolly had resented her sister's authoritative manner of addressing her, she had now no intention of allowing anything which that lady might say to ruffle or disturb her temper.

'Well,' returned Mrs Areley, trying to laugh, 'I did not come here to talk about ladies' maids, delicate or otherwise.'

'No; I suppose not.'

'I want to talk to you, Dolly,' exclaimed Mrs Areley nervously.

'Yes,' returned Dolly, taking up the hair-brush again, and beginning to brush the unplaited half of her hair.

'You do not understand things, you see, Dolly. You looked surprised when I came down this evening. But—'

'People do not wear mourning much now-a-days,' put in Dolly quietly. 'I am not quite so ignorant as you imagine, Florence, for I know that.'

'And I am in mourning,' objected Mrs Areley.

'I never said you were not in mourning, Florence,' was the calm reply.

'And why I should be expected to attire myself in sackcloth—'

'My dear Florence. If, because we have totally different views upon the subject, I looked rather surprised when you appeared this evening in a perfect blaze of diamonds, I apologise for doing so. The diamonds suit you admirably, and I have nothing whatever to do with the arrangements of your wardrobe,' interrupted Dolly quietly.

'Then it is all right, Dolly. We will say no more about it,' returned Mrs Areley airily, evidently relieved by this assurance.

'That is much the best course we can take,' agreed Dolly.

'And now, having disposed of one subject, I want to come to an understanding with you upon another,' continued her sister affably, for, to tell the truth, she had not expected to find Dolly in such an agreeably complacent humour, and she now believed she had a clear and easy course before her.

'Yes, Florence?'

'It is about Major Mulherson,' explained Mrs Areley. 'He is an old friend of mine.'

'I am very sorry to hear it,' said Dolly.

'You do not like him?'

'No, I do not like him.'

'But still, since he is a very old friend of mine, dear, and as I ask you to be moderately civil to him, perhaps you will try to be so to please me?' murmured Mrs Areley, who had been rendered rather uneasy by Dolly's short and cold rejoinders.

'He is not the sort of man I could possibly ever be upon friendly terms with, Florence. Do not ask it,' was the quiet reply.

'But you will be civil to him when he comes over here to—see me?' pleaded the elder sister, quite humbly.

'Certainly. I hope I may never be so unladylike as to be uncivil to anyone in my own house.'

'I—I—asked him to—come over to luncheon to-morrow. I hope you do not mind,' explained Mrs Areley.

'Since you ask me, I do not mind—very much,' replied Dolly.

'I will remember not to ask any friends of mine to my father's house again, Dolly,' was the quiet and cutting retort. 'Times are altered now-a-days, certainly! Anyone would think that you were the elder sister, and I the younger, if they could overhear us.'

'If you choose to take offence about this, I cannot help it, Florence,' returned Dolly quietly. 'Only I am very sorry to be obliged to offend you. And friends of yours, as you know, have an equal right to come here as my own; but I cannot, and will not, as long as you are here, look on quietly while you—flirt. Yes, flirt, Florence—with a man who is not a gentleman. Sooner than do so, I shall go straight to my father and show him how matters stand. Let it be said in Mudshire that my sister is carrying on a flirtation with a man of Major Mulherson's stamp, I will not, if I can help it.'

For several minutes after this quietly-given announcement, Mrs Areley said never a word. Her face, in spite of rouge and powder, was of that kind of greeny-white hue which is characteristic of inward rage. If she had done as she felt an intense longing to do, she would have broken out into a stormy passion. She would have abused Dolly; she would have taught her that she did not mean to be lectured by her in the future, and that she was the last woman in the world to brook interference from anyone—much less from a younger sister. But in spite of her intense longing to do this, Mrs Areley did not give way to it. She was, in her own way, an extremely clever woman. Major Mulherson, and her flirtation with him, were matters of supreme indifference to her. The real object of her visit to her sister's room was as yet unmentioned; she, so far, had only been throwing dust in Dolly's eyes; and although she had brought matters to a very unpleasant crisis, owing to the nature of the dust she had employed, she had no intention of running out of her original course in consequence.

'I never said he was a very gentlemanly man, Dolly,' she remarked at last very quietly.

Dolly was surprised by this answer. And not knowing what to say next she remained silent.

'But he is amusing,' explained Mrs Areley, with apparent good temper. 'And when one arrives at my age, one wants to be amused.'

Again Dolly did not answer. She knew that she was master of the situation, and having won her point, she had no wish now except to get upon pleasant terms with her sister again. But she could not see anything at all amusing in Major Mulherson, or think very highly of the person who found him so; so like a prudent woman she remained silent.

'Well, shall we say no more about him?' suggested Mrs Areley at last, with a curious unmirthful little laugh.

'That will be the best thing we can do,' agreed Dolly pleasantly. 'Since we disagree about him, and we are both extremely obstinate women.'

'A family failing,' returned her sister, with another unmirthful laugh. And then, while Dolly tied up the end of the second plait, Mrs Areley's glance wandered round the room in an abstracted, thoughtful manner.

It was a pretty room, with its pale terra-cotta hangings, its Chippendale furniture, and its general air of cosiness. But Mrs Areley, although she was apparently absorbed in taking in every little detail in it, saw nothing of its cosiness or prettiness.

What was she to say? How open the subject upmost in her mind? It was getting terribly late; must she give it up for to-night?

And, still undecided how to act, Mrs Areley's glance finally settled upon the diamond ornaments which Dolly had recently discarded, and which lay upon the dressing-table close under Mrs Areley's eyes, amidst a confusion of embossed silver hair-brushes and toilet requisites, cut-glass scent-bottles, and china vases filled with flowers.

A lace handkerchief and a pair of small many-buttoned tan-coloured gloves added to that confusion; and Mrs Areley, when her glance finally rested upon those long gloves, suddenly found in the sight of them an answer to her mental questions.

A few hours ago, when her sister had entered the little pink drawing-room, and had asked Lord Ventnor to leave it with her, she had chanced to lay one of those tan gloves, with her hand inside it, in a sisterly, authoritative manner upon that gentleman's arm.

'I want to ask you something, Dolly, said Mrs Areley.

'Yes, Florence,' replied Dolly, sitting down resignedly upon a sofa, not far from her sister's vicinity.

'Well, you must promise not to fly off into another temper about it,' laughed Mrs Areley.

'Very well,' returned Dolly, with a quiet, amused smile.

'Are you engaged to George Ventnor?'

'No. Certainly not,' was the quick answer. The question had taken Dolly rather aback, though, and, in spite of herself a slight, far from unbecoming blush had mounted into her cheeks.

'Do you intend to marry him?'

'Perhaps I had better wait until I am asked,' was the dry answer.

'Nonsense; you have been asked,' returned Mrs Areley curtly.

'Have I?' said Dolly, with an annoyingly quiet smile.

'Yes. Of course,' replied her sister.

After this there was a pause. And at last, realising that Dolly did not mean to speak, Mrs Areley broke it.

'You know you have?' she questioned impatiently.

'Do I?'

'Yes. Why not tell the truth?'

'I really see no necessity for my telling you anything about it, Florence. I am not engaged to him, and that is all that can interest you about it,' was the guarded reply.

'It interests me to know whether it is your intention to marry him or not, Dolly,' returned Mrs Areley. 'Naturally it does! You may as well tell me.'

'I am not engaged to him. There is no idea of my ever marrying him. Does that satisfy you?'

'You will be very foolish if you do not.'

'I perfectly agree with you.'

'Then you mean to do it! I thought so!' exclaimed Mr Areley sharply.

'I do not remember saying so.'

'Very well, Dolly; go your own way!' said Mrs Areley angrily. 'For once in my life I have tried to do you a good turn; you have refused the hand I have offered you, take the consequences!' And, to add to the somewhat theatrical effect of her words, Mrs Areley tossed the silver box, which she had had all the time in her hands, upon the table, in an evident temper, and in so doing upset a high cut-glass scent bottle.

Dolly very quietly picked up the bottle, moved the nick-nacks in its vicinity out of the way, and carelessly mopped up same of the spilt scent with her handkerchief.

'What is it you wish me to say or do, Florence? Why this unpleasantness?' she inquired presently.

'I want to know whether you are going to marry George Ventnor, or you are not going to marry him?'

'I am not going to marry him. I have said so before,' replied Dolly; 'but the subject is one I do not care to discuss.'

'And your reason for not marrying him is because you—'

'Because there is no question of it,' said Dolly quickly.

'Because you do not love him,' continued her sister. 'Bah, child! You are making a mistake! What is love? Why, I used to imagine myself over head and ears in love with Fred. And what good did it do me?'

'Oh, Florence!' murmured Dolly aghast.

'It is very easy to say, "Oh, Florence," in that horrified tone, Dolly; but if you will excuse my saying so, you do not know what you are talking about,' returned Mrs Areley coolly. 'Suppose you married a man, believing him to be perfect—'

'I cannot suppose it,' interrupted Dolly quietly. 'I should never expect to find any man perfect—any more than I could hope to be perfect myself.'

'But when you found him egotistical, bad-tempered

and—other things as well; where would your wonderful love be then? What then?'

'The love would remain where it was, I expect,' was the calm reply. 'And as to the what then! I should make the best of it, I hope.'

'It is a very unsatisfactory best,' returned her sister drily.

'Did it ever enter your head to wonder what poor Fred thought about you, Florence? whether you were perfect yourself? whether you were doing your utmost to adapt yourself to his ways, and to make things pleasant for him?'

'Get up in the pulpit, Dolly. You would make a sensation there,' exclaimed her sister, laughing.

'You annoy me so. I say more than I mean,' protested Dolly contritely. 'I am sure, if you had not seemed so well satisfied with everything, I should often have felt sorry for you in the past; but the kind of life you led seemed to suit you—'

'It did,' put in her sister.

'And to abuse Fred now does seem rather—'

'Useless. Exactly,' interrupted her sister. 'So, really and truly, George Ventnor is nothing to you? she continued, with a little self-satisfied smile.

'What can it matter to you? inquired Dolly, noticing the smile, and at last growing suspicious of the true state of affairs.

'How do you know that I do not want to marry him myself?' returned her sister coolly, and as if in jest.

Dolly wheeled sharply round and looked full in her sister's face. For a few seconds her colour came and went in a fluctuating manner; and then she laughed quite merrily.

'I really apologise, Florence,' she replied laughingly; 'but for a moment I took your words in earnest.'

'And if they had been, would it have been so very dreadful?' returned Mrs Areley very quietly, looking up suddenly at Dolly as she spoke.

'Not at all,' was the quiet answer.

'You quite realise that some woman or other will

marry him for his position and money, some day?' suggested Mrs Areley.

'No, I do not,' said Dolly.

'But that is how it will end; although, of course, I was joking.'

'Of course you were, Florence,' agreed Dolly calmly; 'and as to George ending that way, as you call it, there is not the slightest fear of it.'

And then, both inwardly raging and outwardly smiling, the two sisters looked full in each other's eyes. They thoroughly understood each other now, far more thoroughly than the elder sister had intended.

'Why?' she inquired quietly.

'Because my chief reason for not marrying him is, that I do not think myself good enough for him; but I am many removes better than the woman who would marry him for his money, and infinitely sooner than let him marry such a woman, I would marry him myself.'

There was a moment's silence; and then, before Mrs Areley could speak, her sister stepped forward and kissed her.

'And now, good-night, Florence, for I am really very sleepy,' she added, quite pleasantly.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FLORENCE'S REVENGE.

'If any young man, though a snubb'd younger brother,
When told of his faults by his father and mother,
Runs restive, and goes off to sea in a huff,
Depend on't, my friends, that young man is a muff.'

Ingoldsby Legends.

Dolly, when she threatened that she would marry her cousin herself sooner than let him marry her sister, had never for a moment contemplated having to carry her threat into execution.

The nature of that evening's *tête-à-tête* had been a

shock to the girl. It hurt her more deeply than Florence ever suspected. Until that evening she had thought her sister heartless, reckless, and a flirt; but that as well as all this she was not lady-like, had not entered the girl's head. Good girl as Dolly was, when she discovered this fact it hurt her infinitely more than all the rest. Even with the very best of us number one is very dear; and that Florence should find any pleasure in the society of such a man as Dolly instinctively knew Major Mulherson to be, and that she should calmly entertain the prospect of inveigling George Ventnor into a flirtation, with a view to marrying him for his position, seemed to Dolly to reflect back upon herself, insomuch as she was Florence's sister.

But Dolly, at nineteen, had more sense than many an older woman; and at the very moment when she felt most angry with her, most ashamed of her, and upon the eve of an open rupture with her, she had quietly kissed her sister, and wished her good-night.

That she would get Florence out of Mudshire as soon as possible, without giving her father time to see, as plainly as she herself did, what kind of a woman she had developed into, Dolly resolved then and there. But, as to saying useless words, which would probably cause a life-long unpleasantness between them, she avoided it, like a prudent girl.

As to Florence, as soon as she realised that her flirtations with both Major Mulherson and Lord Ventnor were out of the question, she had no wish to remain at Wyndeane. Her sister's society was not congenial to her, and, had it been so, it would certainly not have been a sufficient attraction to have induced Mrs Frederick Areley to remain for long in Mudshire.

It certainly had entered that lady's head that, if Dolly was not going to marry George Ventnor, she might do worse than marry him herself. An earl was an earl, in Mrs Areley's eyes, and, until she came to stay at Wyndeane, she had been quite satisfied in the prospect of her sister's marrying one. But when she discovered, as she very soon did, that her sister did not view the question

in the right light, she began to think that the next best thing would be that she should marry George herself.

Florence Areley was a born flirt. Nature had made her very handsome, and handsome in a style that men nearly always unanimously admire. She had been admired immensely, flattered immensely, and, what was more to the point, her admirers fell in love with her in a wholesale fashion. So it seemed a very simple matter to her that she should subjugate this extremely easy-going, simple-minded young man.

When she found that Dolly meant to render this subjugation an impossibility—and she quite realised that Dolly's interference would render it impossible—Mrs Areley at once made up her mind that life at Wyndeane did not suit her. In the old days it had been bad enough, but now, with Dolly at the head of the establishment, and every available man seemingly attached to her apron strings, it was quite unendurable.

So the very next day Dolly had the satisfaction of hearing Florence tell Major Mulherson that she was leaving Mudshire in a few days' time, and offer him, by way of compensation for the loss he would sustain in consequence, a hearty welcome at Areley Court in the forthcoming shooting season.

Whether the Major benefited by that invitation to Areley Court or not, Dolly never knew; but if he did so, it was not Mrs Areley who welcomed him there, for before that autumn Florence Areley became Florence Goodhaven, and the much admired wife of one of the fastest young peers in Her Majesty's kingdom. The man she married was the brother of the young Stainbury to whom Katherine Dasher was engaged, and, as Katherine's brother had remarked, 'All that Goodhaven lot were as poor as church mice.' The head of the family was little better off, indeed, than his younger brothers. And had Florence Areley been a far less attractive woman than she was, it would still have suited him extremely well to marry her. As it was, however, he chanced to fall in love with her; and oddly enough, as ime went on the marriage turned out a success. The

admiration which his wife received gratified young Lord Goodhaven's vanity, and the fact that she was a decided flirt did not affect his happiness at all. He was a very easy-going, good-tempered young man, and Florence, as far it lay in her nature to be fond of anyone, became attached to her second husband.

But now to return to the time when Dolly, after having parted affectionately with her sister, found herself once more alone with her father at Wyndeane.

It was in the middle of July that Florence Areley left her father's house, intending to pay a visit to a dear friend of hers, a certain Mrs Tyrell, and it was at Mrs Tyrell's house that she met Lord Goodhaven; and through the fact that Katherine Dasher was engaged to Lord Goodhaven's brother, it very soon came back to Dolly that Florence was proclaiming on the house-tops that her young sister was engaged to George Ventnor.

This was Florence's revenge; and although the result of it was not so unpleasant as it might have been, if either George or Dolly had cared particularly what people said about them, still it naturally led to little awkwardnesses; or rather, strictly speaking, to one little awkwardness.

The news arrived first in Mudshire in a letter Katherine Dasher wrote to her brother. And before mentioning it to any one, that gentleman rode straight over to Wyndeane to congratulate the M. F. H.'s daughter.

For several years Captain Dasher had had that congratulation ready waiting for this occasion. He had often, curiously often, thought it over, and resolved just what he should say and how he would say it. And, still more curious, he had already made up his mind as to the wedding present he meant to give the bride.

George Ventnor was the greatest friend Captain Dasher had ever had; and yet it was to Wyndeane, and not to Ventnor Castle, that he wended his way as soon as he heard of the engagement.

On his arrival there he was informed that Miss Vernon was at home, and a few minutes later Price ushered him into her presence.

When he entered the Wyndeane drawing-room, he found Dolly seated in a low chair by an open window. And very pretty did she look as she quickly laid aside the book she had been reading, and rose with a smile upon her face to greet him.

She was dressed all in white, and there was an unusually pretty colour in her cheeks, and happy expression upon her fair young face. Captain Dasher, for a moment or two after they had shaken hands, did not find anything to say to her. In a simple white dress, and with a sash, also white, tied round her slender waist, Dolly looked so far more girlish, so much younger, than usual. And perhaps it was because of this that Captain Dasher was at first so silent. Latterly anyone, not knowing Miss Vernon's age, would certainly have taken her for five-and-twenty; but to-day she looked barely her real age, nineteen; and Captain Dasher, who expected to find a very fashionable young woman, might naturally have felt surprised when he was greeted by a rather childish-looking girl.

Be that as it might, all the fine speeches which he had so carefully prepared melted into air when he stood before her, and it was not until he found himself seated in a high-backed chair near the open window, that he remembered the real object of his visit. For several minutes Dolly chattered on unceasingly to him, and, for once in his life, hardly hearing her words, Captain Dasher silently sat there opposite her, a curious, unnatural smile upon his lips, and in his eyes a resolute, rather forbidding expression, that certainly did not tally with a smile of any kind or description. Presently he looked at her for the first time since he had shaken hands with her.

It was quite a relief to Dolly when he did so, and she smiled very sweetly as her eyes met his. It was not like Captain Dasher to keep his eyes fixed upon his boots, and that he had been doing so ever since he sat down troubled Dolly greatly. She was very quick, and she had very soon discovered that there was something unnatural in his manner to-day. Some trouble seemed

to be hanging over him. What could be wrong? How she wished he would look at her. And then he did look at her; but there was no solution to the difficulty to be read in his eyes.

'Miss Vernon,' he began slowly at last, 'I heard from Katherine this morning.'

'Did you?' returned Dolly quickly. 'Oh, I hope nothing is wrong with Katherine?'

A little flush had risen into her cheeks. She leant forward in her chair, her little hands were clasped nervously together, and, with much anxiety expressed in her glance, she studied Captain Dasher's face in a sympathetic, questioning manner.

Captain Dasher's eyes again met hers. A dark flush, to correspond with hers, slowly rose into his face, and the forbidding expression deepened in his eyes and seemed to spread itself all over his face.

'No,' he replied after a pause. 'No, nothing is wrong with Katherine.'

'Oh, I am so glad! I was afraid she was ill,' was the relieved reply.

And then there was another silence. This time there was something a little embarrassing in it.

'Goodhaven, Fred Stainbury's brother, is staying at Upperby with the Tyrells,' explained Captain Dasher.

'Is he? Florence is there,' returned Dolly, who was preplexed and felt rather troubled by this sudden change in Captain Dasher's manner, but could not see any connection between Upperby Park and that gentleman.

'Yes, Mrs Areley is there,' was the quiet reply. 'And —and—I did not know until I heard it this morning—about you.'

Now, considering that Captain Dasher had planned many correct and pretty speeches for the benefit of the bride elect, his manner of broaching the subject of her engagement was rather curious; at anyrate it greatly surprised and puzzled Dolly, who for several seconds gazed blankly at him, and then said slowly, 'About me? What about me, Captain Dasher?'

'About you and Ventnor, you know,' explained Captain Dasher briefly.

'About me and George?' repeated Dolly, too much surprised at the moment to feel confused or to realise what it all meant.

Captain Dasher looked up quickly. The flush on his face, which had by this time died away, leaving him rather whiter than usual, suddenly returned with renewed vigour, and the stern expression in his eyes had gone.

'What about George and me?' repeated Dolly at last. And now there was a flush upon her face also, for a suspicion that something awkward was going to happen had by this time presented itself to her.

'Your sister,' vaguely explained Captain Dasher. 'Perhaps it is a secret? But she is telling people about it. Your—your—'

But by now the flush had died out of Dolly's face, and a stern, cold expression had taken its place. She understood now! Florence had been doing this to annoy her! It was too, really too contemptible! She quickly held up her hand, and by so doing, put an end to Captain Dasher's confused explanations.

'I do not know what my sister may have said, Captain Dasher,' she exclaimed hastily. 'But I will write to her to-night about it. If she has gone away with some mistaken idea about my cousin and me, I must set her right about it at once.'

'If it is a mistake, I am very glad that I came straight here with my news,' murmured Captain Dasher.

'I thank you. Yes, it was kind of you,—like you, to do so!' returned Dolly rather absently.

The news had upset her considerably, and she was not thinking of Captain Dasher just then. Had she been doing so, she might have noticed how strangely agitated he looked.

Presently she remembered him.

'I suppose that Florence, coming here for the first time for many years, and not realising what a long-standing friendship has been going on between my cousin and I, ever since our childhood, must be excused for

making this mistake,' she explained quietly. 'Only she might have asked me about it before saying anything to anyone else.'

'Certainly,' agreed Captain Dasher.

And then there was a long silence again. Dolly was full of angry resentment. Of course she must screen her sister, but that fact did not make her feel any the less annoyed with her.

'And—and—' said Captain Dasher at last, 'it is not true?'

Dolly started; she had again forgotten his existence.

'Oh, dear, no, Captain Dasher; there is no shadow of truth in it. Neither George nor I are contemplating such a foolish proceeding. We like each other far too well to think of risking our friendship in the doubtful sea of matrimony,' she replied, in a would-be airy manner.

In which assurance she did not mean to go beyond the truth. This was her own view of the case, and since it was now quite a long time since George had openly disagreed with her about it, she both hoped and believed that he was beginning to see the folly of marrying a girl who had previously been over head and ears in love with another man.

And it was with this assurance ringing in his ears that Captain Dasher for another ten minutes or so remained there talking to Dolly. Ringing in his ears; deafening him to all other sounds; rendering him perfectly unconscious of what either he or Dolly might be saying to each other. Still ringing in his ears as he wished her good-bye, and following him as he walked briskly towards the stables for his horse.

That he should rejoice that there seemed little likelihood of a marriage taking place, which not so very many weeks ago he had assured Major Mulherson was 'what all Mudshire was hoping for,' seemed strange, but rejoice he did. He left Wyndeane that day looking a brighter, younger man than he had done for years; and he gave the groom who brought out his horse half-a-crown instead of the shilling he was in the habit of bestowing upon him.

Captain Dasher had turned over one of the pages in his book of life during that afternoon.

No longer the cold, cynical, rather languid man who, the soul of honour, had refused to allow his thoughts to dwell upon the woman he had heart to love. No longer the quiet, would-be middle-aged man who, never shirking a trying duty, had remained exactly upon the same terms with the master's daughter up to the present time as he had been upon with her in her childhood, save that instead of calling her 'Miss Dolly,' he now addressed her as 'Miss Vernon.' No longer the man who had prepared himself to be upon these same quiet friendly terms with the wife of his best friend.

No! At last Captain Dasher allowed himself to dwell upon the fact that he loved Dolly Vernon. At last he allowed his thoughts to run riot. At last something quite unexpected, quite overpowering, had happened. And it was not until then that he realised fully what a hard, stern conflict between love and honour had latterly been raging within him.

A great many years ago Captain Dasher had loved another woman. They had not been engaged for many weeks when he realised that the girl who was engaged to him was in love with one of his brother officers. Captain Dasher was a rich man; the brother officer was not. If Captain Dasher connected these two facts he kept it to himself; but he quietly, and in the kindest possible manner, told the young lady that he realised she had made a mistake when she accepted him, and he set her free. The day after doing so he sent in his papers, and the following winter saw him installed in a little hunting-box near the Muddleton Kennels. In Mudshire he had very soon earned a character of being a hard one to beat, and Mudshire he had made his headquarters ever since. With men he was extremely popular. An exceptionally good rider all round, a crack shot, full of dry humour, and at heart a real good sort; that was just what any man who knew him—barring, of course, a few outsiders of Major Mulherson's calibre—would have told you about Captain Dasher. But with women he was far from being

equally popular. For one thing, he very seldom spoke to a woman if he could help it; and for another, not having the very remotest idea of how to either flirt or gossip, he had not an idea in common with the generality of them. That there were exceptional women, he had never taken the trouble to discover; for, ever since that unfortunate love affair of his, he had held himself aloof from them. Before that event he had never courted women's society. Like many other young men, he had felt awkward and shy in their presence; and like many another shy young man, when he had at last fallen in love, he had done it very thoroughly. Outwardly he had never shown the slightest symptom of either grief or disappointment, when, shortly after discovering that young women are sometimes fair, he had learnt that they were sometimes false as well. There had not been even a shadow of unpleasantness exhibited in his behaviour upon that occasion. He had talked it over in a friendly, almost fatherly manner with the young lady, and he had talked it over in an equally friendly manner with the young lady's father. And no one else ever heard him open his lips upon the subject. But after that event, instead of being shy and awkward in ladies' society, Harry Dasher became cold and distant, and from that day until the time, years afterwards, when his sister Katherine was suddenly left fatherless,—motherless, like Dolly Vernon, she had been since childhood,—and came to live with him, he had lived his quiet life apart from them.

An exception there is to almost every rule, and in his distaste for the society of the gentler sex, Captain Dasher made an exception of Squire Vernon's little daughter.

As a merry, and extremely lovable child, he had first known her and found pleasure in her society. As a sensible, straightforward, grey-eyed girl, he had continued to find equal pleasure in her presence; and how it had happened he never knew, but in those same grey eyes he had learnt to forget the past and to love again.

Again? Yes! But this love which he has given to Dolly was a very different affair to that earlier love of his! And well as he had kept his love in check, so long

as he had believed her to be another man's property, it was very doubtful if, after hearing that that was not the case, anything now came between them, he would take his second disappointment as calmly as he took his first!

Meanwhile Dolly, quite unconscious of the state of Captain Dasher's mind, as soon as he had left her, sat down and wrote to her sister.

Prudent Dolly might be,—anxious not to quarrel with her only sister as she was,—still she was only human after all, and Florence had now gone a little too far.

And this was Dolly's hastily-written letter:—

'WYNDEANE, *Tuesday.*

'MY DEAR FLORENCE,—I have just been told that you are giving it out that I am engaged to be married. What does it all mean? You know that I am not.—Yours affectionately, VERA VERNON.'

And this was the answer she received, not by return, but several days afterwards:—

'TYRELL HALL, *Saturday.*

'MY DEAR DOLLY,—What a fuss! You are a terrible little spitfire; but I don't blame you, all girls are. You told me quite plainly that *sooner than let anyone else marry your precious George, you would marry him yourself.* Of course I took that as an acknowledgment of your real intention. No one could suppose that the poor young man could be expected to enjoy celibate bliss! And so, *if it is a mistake*, the fault lies not at my door, but at yours. It is I who must ask, "What does it all mean?"—Yours affectionately, FLORENCE ARELEY.'

Mrs Areley smiled complacently as she sealed that letter; but whether she smiled a few days later on, when she received the reply which Dolly sent her, is doubtful:—

'MY DEAR FLORENCE,—Of course it is a mistake, but

never mind. I must tell George all about it, and then he will understand, and if he understands, I do not mind what anyone else may think about it.—Yours affectionately, DOLLY.'

For it never entered Mrs Areley's head that Dolly would sooner have allowed George to understand any other possible solution as to how that report had originated than have explained to him that Florence Areley, her sister, had behaved in such a very questionable manner.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN AFTERNOON CALL.

'Unmeddled joys here to no man befall,
Who least hath some, who most hath never all.'
SOUTHWELL.

ABOUT a fortnight later on, a dogcart was driven rapidly up the Wyndeane Avenue towards the house.

It was drawn by a very smart bright bay horse, and in it sat two people, a man and a woman.

The man had a rather slight muscular figure, and a face which his friends would have called characteristic, and his enemies plain.

Rather above the average height than below it, that slight muscular figure was remarkably well made; it was essentially the figure of a man who had lived the greater part of his life in the saddle and the field.

It would never have entered your head to question whether Captain Dasher was or was not a good-looking man. Bad to beat across country, an awkward opponent in a steeplechase, a clean shot, he had certainly risen above that question.

In Mudshire, if you were a new-comer, somebody would have been certain to have pointed him out to you the first day you saw him, and to have informed you that 'that was Captain Dasher.' If you chanced to be so

ignorant as to reply, 'Yes; and who is Captain Dasher?' your question would most probably have been received, in the first instance, by a blank stare of surprise, and in the next, by the lucid explanation, 'Why, *the* Captain Dasher, of course.'

In fact, both in and out of Mudshire, Captain Harry Dasher was, amongst sportsmen, a well-known man.

The woman sitting beside him was his sister Katherine.

Presently the dogcart dashed up to the front door, and handing the reins to his sister, Captain Dasher alighted and rang the bell.

'Miss Vernon was at home,' Price, who had answered the bell, informed them. And Captain Dasher, refusing his offer to send one of the footmen to the stables with his carriage, left Miss Dasher on the door-step, and drove away stablewards himself. That bright bay horse of his was not, perhaps, the very quietest of animals; and, although he did not say so, Captain Dasher would have been unwilling to have handed him over to anybody's footman.

In the garden, sitting under a group of beech trees, Katherine Dasher found Dolly Vernon and Lady Mary Grey.

Both girls greeted her affectionately. And amidst much laughter, and a small amount of chaff, they showered congratulations upon her.

Katherine Dasher was slight and dark; not very beautiful, but decidedly good-looking. A pleasant, unaffected, ladylike-looking girl; like her brother, and yet unlike him; rather reserved and shy in her manner with strangers; not by any means gushing to her friends; but generally inspiring the strangers with a wish to know her better; and always able to keep her friends when she had made them.

Of all her friends, Katherine Dasher liked the M. F. H.'s daughter the best; and it was Dolly whom, on this occasion, she especially wished to see. But Mary Grey was also a friend of hers; she had seen a good deal of her during the past London season, and until her brother appeared upon the scene she talked chiefly to her.

Had she known how much her brother was wishing to talk to Dolly, Katherine would certainly have continued to talk exclusively to Lady Mary Grey; but having no suspicion even of the truth, she left him to the mercy of that young lady, and as soon as he joined them, turned her undivided attention to Dolly Vernon.

That her brother had offered to drive over to Wyndeane to pay an afternoon call had surprised Katherine considerably at the time. She had concluded that he wished to see the Squire; and when she heard that Colonel Vernon was not at home, she had thought it a bore for Harry. It was evident that he would have to talk to one of the two ladies; and Katherine believed that it did not matter in the least to him which it was.

'Oh, yes, we are to be married next month,' Katherine had replied, in answer to a question Dolly asked her, and then drawing her chair close to her side, she had left her brother to entertain the other lady. 'Harry says it is outrageous,' she continued laughingly. 'But as I tell him it only means his giving up about three days' shooting; and as to Fred, he insists upon our putting it off no longer. I am doubtful if Fred is quite as good a shot as Harry is; he seems so very indifferent about losing that fortnight on the moors.'

'Perhaps he thinks he has had a great many fortnights on the moors, and will probably have a great many more, and that a honeymoon only comes once in a way,' suggested Dolly, with an amused smile.

'So he says. But, as I tell him, they are sometimes quite a frequent event in people's lives. I know one man under forty who has already had five wives,' returned Katherine rather quaintly, in her low, pleasant voice. Their voices were one of the things in which the brother and sister greatly resembled each other.

'I know several who have had four,' returned Dolly, laughing for the moment, and then becoming very grave. 'But I do not think I should care myself to marry more than once,' she added quietly, in a decided manner.

'I quite agree with you, Dolly,' replied the girl who was just going to be married, and who, in her quiet way,

was very much in love with the man she was engaged to. 'But,' and then she paused, and colouring slightly glanced surreptitiously at Dolly's face, 'if what Fred tells me is true—your—sister is not of our way of thinking about it.'

'Florence!' exclaimed Dolly quickly. 'Why, what has she been doing?'

'Fred says he thinks that Charley and your sister are going to make a match of it,' replied Katherine, rather nervously. Have you heard nothing about it?'

'Nothing. Who is Charley?'

'Charley? Oh, Fred's brother. His eldest brother, you know.'

'Lord Goodhaven!' exclaimed Dolly, blushing scarlet as she spoke.

'Yes,' replied Katherine; and then for a second was silent. 'He told Fred about it. I—I—think, Dolly, it is a settled thing.'

And then there was a rather long and a rather awkward silence.

It was Katherine who broke it.

Leaning forward, and lowering her voice, she said earnestly,—

'Of course, there is no denying that he is dreadfully extravagant, and that—that he has got into some very unpleasant scrapes; but—but—I believe he is a very good-hearted fellow at the bottom of it all, and Fred says that, if he marries a sensible woman, he thinks he will settle down and become a rational being. Fred likes him—is devoted to him.

This fact to Fred's bride-elect was a conclusive argument in young Lord Goodhaven's favour; but, in spite of it, Dolly continued to look anxious.

'But I—I don't think Florence is such a very sensible woman, Katherine,' she expostulated nervously.

As a matter of fact, she did not think about it; she knew that she was very far from being so.

'Perhaps not altogether,' agreed Katherine Dasher quietly. 'But she is far more worldly wise than Charley, and she will be his master. Now, Charley wants a master, at least Fred says he does, and I should say he

does myself; and yet I think it would take a clever person to become his master. From what I have seen of her, your sister Florence is a very clever woman.'

'Oh, I think so,' agreed Dolly. 'Yes, she is clever.'

'Well, expect to hear more of it soon, Dolly,' said Katherine. 'And now I think we must be going. We have a man coming to stay to-night, and he is sure to arrive about five o'clock. Are you ready, Harry?'

'Yes,' replied Captain Dasher. 'I will go and get the dogcart.'

Ten minutes later, that same dogcart was again going quickly along the broad drive, under the lime trees, in the Wyndeane Park; only this time it was driving away from the house instead of towards it, and the man who sat upon the box seat of it was not looking quite as cheerful as he had been looking half-an-hour previously.

'My dear girl,' he murmured in mild protest, as soon as they were safely out of hearing, 'I hope you enjoyed yourself; but it really was rather hard lines on me.'

'I was so vexed on your account when I heard that Colonel Vernon was out,' returned his sister sympathetically.

'Yes,' said Captain Dasher, suddenly changing colour, 'of course.'

'Why, Harry?' began Katherine, and then stopped suddenly.

'Oh, yes, of course,' murmured her brother hurriedly. 'Of course, Katherine, that was what I meant.'

And then, in spite of her brother's confusion, Katherine laughed outright.

But, like a sensible girl, she said nothing at all as to why she laughed. And by-and-by her face grew very, very grave.

'That is an awful woman,' murmured her brother presently.

Katherine started.

'Who? Poor Mary Grey?' she questioned, laughing again. 'Why, Harry, she seemed to be talking away so pleasantly to you.'

'Talking!' echoed her brother meekly. 'Talking,

Kitty! Why, she would talk one idiotic in less than half-an-hour! Preserve me from her in the future, if you love me! Lady Francis I like very much, but as to her sister—her sister is a terrible woman!'

And Katherine, well accustomed as she was to hearing her brother protest that some unfortunate lady he had chanced to meet was 'an awful woman,' still questioned sagely, in her own mind, whether he did not owe Mary Grey an extra grudge, because by talking so unceasingly, she had rather drowned the sound of Dolly's voice.

Katherine Dasher had had a great surprise that afternoon; and she sighed heavily that evening, thinking over 'poor Harry's most unfortunate love affairs.' For Katherine, like her neighbours, believed Dolly to be Lord Ventnor's future wife.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CHECK; AND WITHOUT A CHECK.

'The first day I saw him, they said at the meet,
That's a rum one to follow, and bad one to beat.'

WHYTE MELVILLE.

Now, although Captain Dasher had made up his mind that he might try to win Dolly Vernon for his wife, since she was not going to marry her cousin, he was not the sort of man to do anything precipitately.

He never for a moment deceived himself into the belief that Dolly could possibly be in love with him. He knew that she was not. He knew that at present she looked upon him as an old friend—possibly as an old friend of her father's; but he was not really even middle-aged; and he saw no reason why, in time, he might not teach her to think differently about him.

So, like a wise man, he contented himself by driving over to Wyndeane rather frequently at tea-time; by paying a good deal of attention to the M. F. H.'s daughter when they met in town on the occasion of his sister's wedding; and by spending three weeks with the M. F. H.

at 'Glenore'—the Squire's shooting-box in Scotland—to the exclusion of some far better invitations elsewhere.

That three weeks in Scotland was about as high a test as could have been put upon Captain Dasher's love. Birds were rather scarce at Glenore that year; and, in staying there so long, Captain Dasher greatly astonished his friend the Squire.

Oddly enough, the truth of the matter never crossed the Squire's mind any more than it crossed his daughter's. Captain Dasher was an extremely quiet man at any time, and his idea of love-making was in keeping with his general behaviour.

And so the autumn passed by, and the winter set in; and, although he was by that time one of Dolly's best friends, and they got on together capitally, no word of love had passed between them, and Dolly still remained ignorant that any thought or intention, otherwise than platonic, regarding her, had ever entered Captain Dasher's head.

It was when returning home from hunting one day, very early in the season, that Dolly was, for the second time, made to understand that a platonic friendship between a very pretty girl and a gentleman under a certain age was certainly an extremely risky affair, as far as the happiness of the latter was concerned.

It had been a shock to Dolly to learn that her cousin could not think of her as a sister; but it was a still more surprising matter to her when she realised that quiet, unsentimental, rather cynical Captain Dasher was, after all, only an ordinary human being, just as prone to weaknesses as the rest of his fellow-men.

She had overtaken him about three miles from the kennels on the day she made this discovery. He was walking, leading a lame horse.

'Coming home early,' he had remarked, as she drew up her horse beside him.

'Yes. Madcap had had about enough of it, and I had no second horse out to-day,' she answered, and then added sympathetically, 'Oh, I am so sorry to see that it is Peter.'

'Yes, it's a bit of bad luck. I fear it is in the shoulder, too.'

'I am afraid it looks like it,' returned Dolly quietly, surveying Captain Dasher's best hunter as she spoke.

'You will catch cold if you go at this pace, won't you?' he asked presently, his voice plainly implying that he hoped she would contradict his suggestion.

'Oh, no,' returned Dolly brightly, 'I will stay with you until we get to the turn. It is so horrid being alone with a lame horse, and walking in one's top-boots.'

'You are very kind-hearted, Miss Vernon, and I am so selfish that I cannot refuse so good an offer.'

'Nonsense. As to goodness and kindness,' returned Dolly lightly, 'you would do as much for me, I hope.'

'Ah, but then that is so different,' murmured Captain Dasher.

'Not at all,' said Dolly.

'But, indeed, it is,' he returned slowly. 'You must know what a pleasure it is to me to be with you.'

'And, since we are in such a polite humour, you must know that I like you every bit as well as you like me,' was the frank, friendly reply.

'I wish I could believe that, Miss Vernon,' Captain Dasher returned gravely.

And then, for a moment, in her surprise and consternation, Dolly's heart seemed to stand still.

There was no mistaking the manner in which he had made that speech.

'I have said more than I intended to say,' he murmured presently in a nervous manner. 'I know this—is a new idea to you—but, please, forgive me, and allow me to go on as before.'

Dolly really did not know what to say. She was feeling upset, and rather frightened. There seemed to be something so terrible in the idea that Captain Dasher was in love with her. Of all the men in the world, the most improbable.

'You will allow me to try?' he inquired presently, laying his hand on her horse's neck in an absent, nervous manner. 'I know I only have an outside chance. I

know I am not nearly good enough for you, but—but I love you, Dolly.'

'Surely—surely not,' gasped Dolly.

'Very surely I do. And—I think I could make you happy, if you ever think it possible. I should devote my life to you, Dolly. And—I am—I mean I have plenty of money, you know. I would never have thought of it if I had not. I mean—I would never have mentioned it to you, if I had not—'

'I do not care at all for money, Captain Dasher. Please do not say that you think I do,' murmured Dolly.

'I am quite sure you do not,' he replied earnestly. 'Only, if a man really loves a woman, it would be his first consideration. Can he make her as happy as she has been before, or would she be happier—with some other fellow.'

'Yes,' returned Dolly, hardly knowing what to say. 'I suppose a good man would look at it from that point of view, but, meanwhile, the girl would only be happy with the man she loved. Rich or poor, it would make very little difference.'

'Do you think it even remotely possible that you could ever—love me?' asked Captain Dasher, in a very low voice.

'I am afraid not,' replied Dolly, in a tone still lower.

'But I may try?' he pleaded.

There was a long pause.

'I may try? Say I may try to win your love?' he again pleaded anxiously.

'What am I to say? I am so sure it would be useless,' faltered Dolly.

'Tell me that you do not like poor old George better than you like me?'

'As a brother, I like George better than any one in the world, save my father,' replied Dolly firmly; 'but—'

'You do not love him any better than you love me?' interrupted Captain Dasher eagerly, flushing crimson in his glad relief.

'No; no better,' returned Dolly quietly.

'Less?' whispered the man beside her.

'Oh, Captain Dasher, I cannot marry you. It is

quite impossible!' exclaimed Dolly, nervously. 'I shall never marry anybody.'

'That is nonsense, Dolly,' was the grave rejoinder; 'but if you do not love me, and I knew that you did not before I asked you, let us say no more about it—at present.'

'I cannot encourage you to hope.'

'But you will permit me to do so, as a favour?' he interrupted gently.

'Warning you that it is useless. Yes,' she replied quietly. 'I am so very sorry about it all. I feel terribly to blame.'

'Whereas you are not to blame at all,' was the quiet answer. 'If middle-aged gentleman will fall in love with—'

'But you are not middle-aged,' objected Dolly sorrowfully.

'Not to the girl who knew me ten years ago?' questioned Captain Dasher in a wistful manner.

'You certainly seemed very old then,' agreed Dolly, smiling a tired, rather sad little smile as she spoke.

'I am fifteen years older than you are, at any rate.'

'But that is nothing. That would make no difference,' Dolly returned eagerly; 'only—'

'Only it is impossible,' he added quietly. 'Very well, so be it. We will continue to be the best of friends, I hope, Miss Vernon.'

And so saying, he held out his hand, for they were at the turn in the road which led to Wyndeane.

'Good-bye,' murmured Dolly, in a very low, depressed voice.

'Good-bye,' returned Captain Dasher, quite cheerfully.

For a few seconds he held her little hand in its dog-skin glove very firmly in his. He seemed unwilling to part with it.

Then he raised his hat, and, in a few more minutes, the had disappeared from view.

How Captain Dasher felt that evening, who shall say? He alone knew. It had certainly been a bad day for him, take it altogether, and his valet observed to Mrs Simpson, the housekeeper, that 'the Captain had took the laming of that 'ere 'orse h'awful bad!'

And, although no one except himself knew just how he felt, it was certainly true that Captain Dasher looked 'awfully bad' that evening. He did not smoke, he did not read; he eat next to no dinner, and, being very nearly a teetotaler, he did not even have the satisfaction of an extra glass of wine or two.

He looked like a man who had lost all interest in life that evening, as he sat alone, gazing into the fire. Hunting, well, he never wished to see a horse again. How old was he? Thirty-five—only thirty-five. How abominably young. Why, he might be unfortunate enough to live another thirty-five—another forty-five—nay, even another fifty-five years.

'What on earth was he to do with himself?' he kept wondering all that evening. 'How in the world could he drag on for another aimless, lonely, miserable, even thirty-five years?'

Nor did he find an answer to that question, even when, the following morning, he got up at seven, had breakfast at eight, and set off for a fifteen-mile drive to covert at nine.

The morning seemed unbearably cold; his breakfast was uneatable, and the drive nearly unendurable.

But they chanced to have a clinking run that day. Forty-five minutes without a check across the very best bit of country in all Mudshire.

And it was Captain Harry Dasher who cut out the work for them, from find to finish, very much as usual.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A COMPLICATED BUSINESS.

'A chance may win that by mischance was lost;
That net that holds no great,—takes little fish,
In some things all, in all things none are crossed,
Few all they need, but none have all they wish.'

SOUTHWELL.

'DOLLY! Dolly!'

'Yes, George,' exclaimed Dolly Vernon, bringing 'Viking' to a stand-still as quickly as she could.

It was about a fortnight later on, and the Muddleton were in the middle of a slow hunting run.

'Have you seen Elders? Is he out?'

'No; I am afraid not. Is he wanted? What is the matter?'

'Dasher!' gasped George Ventnor, and then tore onwards again at a gallop.

Instinctively Dolly turned her horse's head and followed him. Something strange and cold had happened in the region of her heart; but the M. F. H.'s daughter had not hunted ever since her childhood without having acquired a certain amount of presence of mind in the face of a difficulty. Apart from this, she was the last person in the world who would have allowed any personal feelings of her own to stand between her and her reason at a time when, by retaining her reasoning powers, she might possibly be of use to a friend.

'Captain Dasher had had a very serious accident,' George gasped out to her, as, side by side, they galloped along towards a field, where a little group of dismounted horsemen were to be seen in the distance.

It seemed that Captain Dasher had been late for the meet, and that he had only been larking over a small fence, while looking for the hounds, when the accident happened.

That was all that George knew about it at present. A farmer, shouting inquiries for Doctor Elders, had been his informant.

When they joined that group of dismounted horsemen, they found that Captain Dasher was quite unconscious, and everyone was looking extremely grave and anxious.

No doctor had as yet been found.

George hurried in a state of frenzied distraction to the side of his prostrate friend.

Not a single person present seemed to have the very faintest idea of what to do.

One man suggested giving him 'hot water;' but as there was no 'hot water' within a mile of them, this suggestion fell rather flat. Then someone else tried to get him to take some brandy; but poor Captain Dasher

was not in a state to render the 'taking' of anything possible.

And then a quiet voice informed that troubled little crowd that Wyndeane was only a mile away, and that the speaker was going straight there, and would send a conveyance, and that someone must gallop to Verby village at once to see if the doctor of it was at home.

Three men instantly galloped off to Verby, and Miss Vernon, almost before she had finished speaking, had disappeared in another direction.

Everybody afterwards declared that if it had not been for the M. F. H.'s Daughter, Captain Dasher would not have been alive that night. It was Miss Vernon who sent post-haste to Muddleton for Dr Simsby; it was Miss Vernon who saw that everything was in perfect readiness for the injured man's arrival; it was Miss Vernon who did everything that was required at a most critical moment, and did it so promptly, and so quietly, that she enforced promptitude at a time when delay and indecision would have cost Captain Dasher his life.

And Captain Dasher, when, attended by Dr Simsby, he was borne into that large, spare bedroom, on the south side of the house at Wyndeane, certainly seemed more likely to die than live.

All that night Dr Simsby and another doctor stayed, and sat up with him at Wyndeane. In the morning he was still unconscious; and, although it was certain he had smashed four of his ribs, it was perfectly out of the question to think of setting them.

Dr Simsby, with a very grave face, spoke almost hopelessly of internal injuries, and the case was altogether an extremely critical one.

It had been a terrible night for everyone at Wyndeane, nobody had even thought of going to bed. George Ventnor, the Squire, and Dolly alternately, either sat miserably over the billiard-room fire, or wandered noiselessly along the passages to hear if anything was altered in the sick-room.

Nothing altered there all night, the unconscious man was still unconscious. That he had injured one of his

lungs was certain, but to what extent neither of the doctors knew.

Katherine Stainbury was abroad, and Captain Dasher had no other near relations. Of course Katherine was wired for, and equally, of course, she and her husband started off at once, and travelled night and day until they arrived at Wyndeane.

By the time they arrived, Captain Dasher had regained consciousness; his ribs were set, and although still very ill, there were hopes of his recovery. Dr Simsby no longer lived in the house, but no one except the hospital nurse was allowed to enter the sick-room.

Katherine was very nearly crazy. She was devoted to her brother, and, in her anxiety, feared the worst, of course.

That she was not permitted to see him was an unexpected blow to her. She was just in that humour which makes inaction unendurable, and, for several days, Dolly and young Fred Stainbury had a truly dreadful time with her.

And then came a decided change for the better; Katherine was allowed to see her brother; and, from that, took turns with the nurse in watching him.

Everybody began to be more cheerful, and the dreadful gloom which had hung over Wyndeane and the neighbourhood gradually dispersed. As is usual, while Captain Dasher had been dangerously ill, everyone had looked upon him as a dead man; but as soon as he was proclaimed out of danger, it was almost forgotten that he was ill.

Nevertheless, Captain Dasher was still very ill indeed; and, on the second Sunday after his accident, Dr Simsby talked very seriously to the Squire and Mr Stainbury about a possible relapse.

Katherine went nearly out of her senses, and again made up her mind for the worst. The Squire also took a bad view of the case, and thus confided his fears to Dolly.

'I cannot make it out. Dasher seemed such a wiry, strong chap, and yet here he is, seemingly unable to

shake off the effects of this horrid business, as most other men would do. Simsby says that ever since Wednesday he has been slowly getting weaker; he does not seem to care, or make any effort to shake off his illness. There is no doubt he is in a very weak state, and in terribly low spirits.'

On the Monday, Dr Simsby gave a decided opinion that, unless Captain Dasher did make an effort, and could be got out of the low state into which he had fallen, it was highly improbable that he would recover.

The fact of the matter was that, like many another strong man, Captain Dasher was one of those people who give themselves up when they feel low and ill; and he had quite made up his mind that he was going to die; that, on the whole, it would be less objectionable to die than to be laid up week after week with an abominable pain in his side, and a still more abominable difficulty in drawing his breath; and that the sooner he died the better.

The following day Dolly startled her father not a little by expressing her intention of going to see him.

'He must be roused out of this apathy,' she had explained in a decided manner; 'and, since none of you seem able to rouse him, I had better see what I can do.'

'But, my dear, what can you do?' asked the Squire in a perplexed way.

'I cannot quite say until I have seen him, Dads; but I must do something,' was the quiet answer.

'He must not speak, Dolly, and he seems to take no notice of Katherine, so it is hardly—'

'Likely that he will notice me,' put in Dolly. 'You are mistaken. I do not say that if it had not been for me he would have been in a less low condition, for I do not think that; but I do know that I can inspire him with a wish to pull through.'

'What do you mean?' asked the Squire.

'I mean that he—he loves me,' she replied quietly.

'Good heavens, Dolly!' exclaimed her father aghast.

'Yes. It makes it rather complicated,' she agreed quietly. 'And I have been blaming myself, and accusing

myself of being at the bottom of this apathy of his; but I think now it is lucky that things are as they are. Probably, if I had not been in the question, the apathy would still have been the same, and there would have been no means of rousing him out of it; as it is, I believe I can save his life.'

For several seconds the Squire did not speak. All power of speech had left him. Then he asked in a very low, gasping voice, what she meant to do.

'Well, Dads, there is Captain Dasher's life on the one side, and my rather foolish determination never to marry on the other, and—you must see for yourself what I ought to do.'

'Oh, Dolly! my dear girl!' was all her father could say, in dire trouble and perplexity.

'I am not rushing into this in the headlong way that you imagine, Dads,' continued Dolly quietly. 'I have been thinking it over for several days. Perhaps I ought never to have hesitated, but I did hesitate.'

'And—can you—I mean, you do not care for him, child—George?'

'I can never marry George, Dads. That is perfectly out of the question,' was the quick answer. 'I could not do that. I would as soon marry my brother, if I had one. And—and—it may seem strange to you, but I think I do care a little for Captain Dasher.'

'As any impulsive, kind-hearted woman would, under the circumstances,' groaned the Squire.

'No. I think I cared a little for him—from the first—from the day he told me, I mean.'

And then there was a long silence. The Squire knew full well that his daughter was not in love with the man who was lying upstairs at death's door. He also did not doubt that she could very probably save his life. And if ever there was a kind-hearted, honest, well-meaning gentleman placed in a trying and difficult position, Squire Vernon was that man, at that moment, as he stood there, looking helplessly into his daughter's face.

A man's life was hanging in the scales, and there were only two reasons why Squire Vernon should in the least

object to his favourite child's marrying that man. His wish that she should marry George, and his belief that she did not care for Captain Dasher. And it all ended as might have been expected. Flustered, unhappy, and extremely ill at ease, Squire Vernon, ten minutes later, escorted Dolly up to Captain Dasher's room.

Katherine, who had at last been persuaded to go and lie down, was not there, and, when Dolly entered the room, the nurse—a pleasant, smiling woman—rose and curtsied to her.

And while Dolly passed on to Captain Dasher's side, the Squire stood talking to her in a low voice by the fire.

Dolly had never seen anyone who was very ill before, and the change in Captain Dasher was a great shock to her.

But she very quietly drew a chair close up to the bedside, and sat down in it. He had taken her hand in his, and she made no effort to remove it.

'I hope you are going to get better soon,' she said gently; 'we want you about again so much.'

Captain Dasher's eyes had never been removed from her face since she had entered the room, and now he smiled up at her in a contented, resigned manner that alarmed her.

'I—don't mind—' he whispered back in a low, very weak voice—'I know you all mean to be kind—but it—is all—up with me this time—and, if you will—come and see me—sometimes—'

'Hush,' she said firmly. 'I am not going to allow you to talk. I will certainly come and see you, if you promise to get better quickly.'

'I—don't mind,' he began again.

'But I do, Harry,' she returned quietly; 'I mind very much indeed.'

Captain Dasher's white face suddenly flushed crimson.

'Be quiet,' she continued firmly, her fingers closing over his as if to enforce obedience. 'You must be quite quiet, and you must get well—for my sake. I—I—made a mistake the other day. I—want you to get well—and marry me.'

CHAPTER XXX.

A NEW IDEA.

'Tis only being in love or debt
That robs us of our rest,
And he that is quite free of both
Of all the world is blessed.'

SUCKLING.

THAT same afternoon Dolly Vernon stood alone by the fire in the hall. It was evident that she was waiting there for some purpose.

Her face was very grave, and her grey eyes were fixed upon the burning embers in a thoughtful, pre-occupied manner.

If a few months ago she had looked almost childish in a white cambric dress, with a sash round her waist, in her present attire of dark green cloth, with its heavy trimmings of light bear fur, she certainly looked as if she had left childhood a long way behind her. A stranger would have taken her for a woman of between five-and-twenty and thirty years of age. She had a distinguished, almost regal manner of carrying that tall, slight figure and well-shaped head of hers, and that assured, self-confident air which a really popular and beautiful woman, either consciously or unconsciously, adopts from force of habit as her right.

There are some women who shine in society just as conspicuously as the morning star shines out from amongst his fellow satelites. A beautiful, clever, interesting, or amusing woman will get on very well in that same society, as long as this one other woman is not present; but as soon as she appears, without any effort on her own part, she will be certain to be the centre of attraction, and to take the top place, be she where she may. There is no explaining why it is, or how it is, or in what lies her peculiar attraction. She is born to it, and it is innate in her to stand thus above and apart from her fellow-creatures.

As a matter of fact, these women are best fitted to be

the wives of public men. They not only can rise with their husbands, but they can raise them, and be perfectly invaluable to them.

But Dolly, either unconscious that she was no every-day young woman, or disregardful of the fact, looked thoughtfully into the fire, and felt far from dissatisfied with the turn her affairs had now taken. It is true she had not given much heed to the future, but it is also true that she had not rushed into her present engagement in a headlong, unthinking manner. She did not try to hoodwink herself into the belief that she was in love with Captain Dasher, and she knew she felt only the anxiety of a dear friend about his present critical state; but she was surprised to find that it seemed possible to her to quietly contemplate the probability of his becoming her husband.

Presently a step was heard outside the door, the bell rang, and George Ventnor was admitted into the hall. Dolly did not alter her position until one of the footmen had relieved him of his coat, hat and gloves, and they found themselves alone. Then she turned quietly round and looked up at him as he stood beside her. She did not offer him her hand, but merely remarked, rather nervously,—

'So you have come.'

'Of course,' was the quiet answer. 'Luckily I happened to be in when your note arrived, and I ordered the dogcart at once.'

After this there was a short silence. He did not ask her why she had sent for him, and she seemed in no hurry to proffer any information on the subject.

'How is Dasher?' asked George presently.

'Much the same, perhaps, if anything, a little better,' she returned quietly, and then added,—'I wanted to see you. Come into my room.'

So saying, she moved quickly away from her position by the fire, and crossed the hall, finally pulling aside a heavy tapestry curtain, and entering her own especial sitting-room. What sudden recollection was it that caused her to pause for a second on its threshold, and

suddenly change colour? Only for a moment; then she passed on, and took up her position on the hearthrug, facing the fire, just as it had been in the hall.

'I wanted to see you before you heard, George,' she began quietly. 'I wished to be the first to tell you about it.'

'Yes, Dolly,' he replied readily, in a perfectly unconscious manner, and with never a shadow of a suspicion of the truth in his mind. 'I do not know what it may be, but I should certainly have taken it amiss if you had not told me; of that I am certain.'

'I wished to tell you,' she repeated slowly, as if to gain time.

'But will you not sit down?' he suggested, in an apparently innocent manner, with a hope that, if only she would settle comfortably down into a chair, their interview might be prolonged a little.

'I would rather stand.'

'I hope nothing is wrong?' exclaimed George, who had suddenly become conscious of something unusual in her manner.

'No, nothing is wrong,' said Dolly.

'That is a mercy!' returned George, evidently relieved.

Then, for several seconds, there was a rather awkward pause.

'You know how badly Dr Simsby thought of poor Captain Dasher this morning—' Dolly began at last, in an explanatory and nervous manner.

'Good God, Dolly!' gasped George. 'You don't mean to say that poor old Harry is dead?' and as he spoke, all the colour flew out of George Ventnor's face, and he laid his hand upon the mantelshelf as if for support.

'No—oh, no, George,' was the quick horrified answer.

'Thank Heaven!' said he. 'Poor, dear, old Harry!'

'You are very fond of him, George?'

'Indeed, I am. He is the very best fellow I know by a long way,' was the gravely given reply. 'I do not think I ever realised until now how much I really cared for him.'

'Had you ever any suspicion that he—cared for me?' asked Dolly abruptly.

George flushed crimson.

'I am answered,' observed Dolly quietly. 'Do not be afraid, George. I should certainly not have asked you had I not already known it for a fact.'

'I used to think so, Dolly; I was afraid of it. I am certain no one else suspected anything;—but—'

'But you saw how it was.'

'Yes, I saw how it was. Poor old Harry. It is rather rough on him; he is such a real good fellow.'

'He only told me about it a short time ago,' returned Dolly, rather nervously.

'I should never have thought him likely to have mentioned it to you at all,' replied George, evidently surprised.

'I am glad he did so, though,' continued Dolly quietly. 'It has all turned out for the best.'

George looked still more surprised, and glanced at Dolly in a questioning manner. That she should have mentioned the subject to him at all had greatly astonished him, because he knew she was the last woman in the world to discuss such a subject with anyone; but that she should say it was for the best astonished him still more.

'It gives him a wish to recover, you see,' explained Dolly awkwardly.

'If—if—he thought he had a shadow of a chance, certainly, Dolly,' assented George gravely. 'But I am afraid poor old Harry would be the last fellow to be oversanguine upon a doubtful question.'

'I am going to marry him, George,' she said abruptly.

'Going—to—marry—him!' repeated George in amazement, and evidently only half taking in the sense of what he was saying.

'Yes, George,' she replied.

And then there was an extremely long and painful pause, during which George collected his scattered wits, and became conscious of the gravity of the situation.

'This is very sudden,' he observed at last, in an abrupt, jerky manner.

'Yes, rather,' agreed Dolly; 'you see he wanted rousing, and in his present low state—'

'Nothing short of this would have done it?'

'I fancy not.'

Another long pause.

'And—and—you—care for him?'

'Yes, George, I certainly care for him,' she replied very quietly; and in that answer he realised the truth. Another long silence followed it.

'Poor old Harry!' he murmured by-and-by. 'Well, he will pull through now!'

'I hope so,' returned Dolly gravely.

'There is no doubt of it,' asserted George quietly. 'He is certain to do so. And—I am glad Dolly. I—do not think you could marry a better fellow—or one—more suited to you in every way. I am glad, dear; very glad.'

Dolly, gazing into the fire, made no reply.

'It is just what I should have expected from you, Dolly,' he continued hurriedly. 'I honour you for it, dear. I believe you will never repent it, and that—you will be happy with him—and now, if you will not mind, I think I would rather slip away home, without saying anything more or—seeing anyone else. I shall get used to the idea in time, Dolly—'

Dolly's hand was firmly clasped in both of his, and again there was a long pause.

'But it is a new idea to me this evening, you see—and I want to think it over a bit,' continued George at last, huskily; 'I am awfully glad it is Dasher, you know—but—but—'

George Ventnor never finished that sentence. With a final ring of Dolly's hand, he turned abruptly away, and left her standing alone.

A few minutes later, however, much to her surprise, he again entered the room. He carried his hat in his hand, and was enveloped down to his feet in a thick ulster.

'I thank you, dear Dolly, for—for—letting me know—like this. It is like you,' he exclaimed in a rather

broken voice, when once again he stood beside her. 'I ought to have thought of thanking you before;—but this is a beastly selfish world we live in—and—I forgot it—in—'

'My dear boy, why thank me?' interrupted Dolly quietly, 'surely after all these years of friendship I owed you that much; why I hurried you over here I hardly know—'

'But I know, Dolly,' was the quiet rejoinder; 'because you wished to tell me quietly, and let me get over it a bit before—Dolly, do not do that, for pity's sake!' he added sharply, for he had only just become aware of the fact that her eyes were full of unshed tears.

'He is not half good enough for you, dear. There is not a fellow living who is half good enough for you!' he continued brokenly. 'But he is a good chap,—a far better chap than I am; and do not bother about it on my account, Dolly. I am really pleased that it is Dasher. We shall not lose you now,—and I knew all the time you would never—marry me. It is pretty much the same thing your being the Squire's daughter or Harry's—I mean it need not make any difference to me, you see, Dolly—'

'Indeed, it need not,' was the quick reply.

But it did make a very great difference to Lord Ventnor, and, although he tried rather unsuccessfully to hide his feelings on the subject from her, the whole idea was extremely painful and distasteful to him.

As he had said, he had always known that there was little hope of her ever marrying him; that was altogether too much to expect, and he had often wished, and believed he would be glad to hear that she had got over that unfortunate love affair of hers, and was going to marry someone who was worthy of her, and would make her happy,—but now that it came to the point, George discovered that it went bitterly against the grain with him, and that he could not contemplate her marriage in at all a calm or brotherly manner.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DOLLY PASSES OVER A DIFFICULTY.

'In a climate so very unsettled as ours,
It's as well to be cautious and guard against showers.'
Ingoldsby Legends.

'DOLLY.'

'Yes, Francis.'

'Can this, which they tell me, be true?'

'Quite true, dear.'

The two women stood facing each other in that little blue drawing-room at Fairscroft, with its pretty hangings and pictures, where two years ago Lady Mary Grey had tried to persuade her sister not to attempt to interfere in that uncomfortable little affair between Dolly and her handsome soldier-lover. That attempt, on the part of a good-natured woman, had, as we know, been in vain; Fanny Fairsmore had refused to think of anyone save George Ventnor; she had gone to Wyndeane, made an all-important discovery, ousted the handsome, unprincipled hussar, and, as far as it in her power lay, cleared the course for the man she loved.

And what was the end of it all? Surely not this? Surely it could not be possible that, after two years of seeming security, the ground was trembling beneath her feet, and her air-castle was scattered to the winds.

That 'quite true, dear,' of Dolly's settled all doubt on this point, and, too dismayed and crushed to even try to keep up appearances, Fanny sank down on a sofa near her, and fixed her eyes in an almost vacant way upon the face of the girl who possessed George Ventnor's love, and to whom it was absolutely worthless.

'You are going to marry Captain Dasher?' she said slowly, after a long pause.

'If he recovers,' returned Dolly soberly.

'There is no doubt on that point now, is there? Dr Simsby considers him out of danger.'

'He does. I hope it may be so,' was the grave rejoinder.

Dolly Vernon's eyes were fixed steadily on Lady Francis's face, and were meeting her glance in a half-reproving, half-warning fashion. She knew instinctively just how Fanny Fairsmore was thinking about it all. She knew that Fanny had already divined that she was not really in love with the man she was engaged to; and she foresaw that many things might shortly be said between them which would be far better left unsaid. Looking on into the future, she saw herself as Captain Dasher's wife, and Fanny as the Countess of Ventnor. Up to this time no word on the subject of George and his love affairs had passed between them, and now, looking ahead, as all wise people ought to do, Dolly resolved, if she could possibly prevent it, no such word should be spoken.

But Fanny Fairsmore was either less far-seeing or more unwise than her friend, and, heedless of that warning glance and grave rejoinder, she exclaimed petulantly,—

'What in the world possessed you to act in such an unaccountable manner?'

Dolly sat down quietly beside her, and took one of her hands in hers. Physically, as well as mentally, she was the stronger woman of the two; and, as her fingers closed firmly over that small white hand, Fanny Fairsmore, as Captain Denham had often done before her, began to feel rather ashamed of an impulsiveness which had been carrying her out of the path of reason.

'And in what way is my conduct so unaccountable, Fan?' asked the girl, with a quiet smile. 'Ought I to have given you a hint long ago that I thought Captain Dasher an unusually agreeable and sensible man?'

'You are being very masterful about it, Dolly, as you always are when you want everything to go quite your own way,' murmured Lady Francis rather meekly.

'And suppose I am, Fanny? Surely, when it comes to a question of my own future, I am right, and have a right to be so?'

I—I'—cannot help thinking that circumstances have hnrired you into an engagement which you otherwise

would never have contemplated for a moment,' replied Lady Francis.

'You are quite wrong in thinking so, Fanny,' was the earnest reply. 'I had contemplated it very seriously before his accident.'

There was no doubting the truth of this assurance; and, greatly as it surprised her, Lady Francis was compelled to believe it. It altered the whole case.

'I suppose the way he rides is a great attraction to you,' sighed Lady Fanny, in a rather childish, discontented voice, after a long pause.

'I could not possibly deny that fact, Fan,' returned Dolly, laughing irresistibly, in spite of herself. 'It could not fail to be an attraction to anyone who understood the matter. But, my dear girl, why are you so unwilling to see the many advantages which are, after all, so much more to the point than the one you have so reluctantly accorded to the man who has always been one of my greatest and best friends?'

'Friends!' repeated Lady Francis sarcastically.

'Undeniably,' returned Dolly calmly; 'as good a one as I could wish for.'

'Oh, no doubt,' agreed her ladyship. 'It is only as a —lover—that I—'

'Object to him,' put in Dolly, with a forgiving smile. 'Exactly, Fanny; but why do you object to him? What is there to be said against him?'

'Nothing that I know of,' was the lugubrious reply.

'Of course there is nothing,' agreed Dolly quickly; 'nothing that anybody knows of, I hope. He is a really charming man, Fan — do not doubt it. Is he not George's best friend? Has he not been so for years?'

Lady Francis's little mouth closed in an ominous manner. George's best friend, indeed! A pretty manner this of dealing with one's chosen friend!

'Of course he is,' continued Dolly in the same quick, bright manner. 'George assures me he is the best fellow living, and that I could not do better than marry him. And then, has he not five thousand a year?

Does he not belong to a good old family? What more would you have, Fan?'

'Five thousand a year!' repeated Lady Francis, who, like many another sensible, practical person, could sometimes be as stupid as an owl. 'What in the world has that got to do with it?'

Dolly turned her head, bestowed a mild glance of amusement upon the petulant little woman beside her, and, without troubling to answer such a foolish question, once again captured one of her ladyship's little hands, and patted it soothingly between her own.

Only for a few seconds, however, for it was almost immediately withdrawn impetuously.

'Do you really think you can conciliate me to this new idea by treating me like a child, Dolly? Soothing down my ruffled feathers by little senseless pats like those, and suggestions of five thousand a year? And do you really think I do not know that, when it comes to a question of marriage, five thousand a year or fivepence would be all the same to you?'

'You seem to take me for a very passable fool, Fanny,' returned Dolly rather drily; but whether she referred to the doubt Lady Francis had cast upon her knowledge of her friend's understanding powers, or her own incapability to do an ordinary subtraction sum, remained an open question.

'N—o,' returned Lady Francis slowly. 'No, I did not mean to imply that—quite, dear. Only I think I am getting prematurely old, for I cannot fall in quickly to new ideas. And this is such a very new idea to me, Dolly.'

'Yes, it is new to everyone at present,' returned Dolly quietly; 'it is even rather new to me. But, like all other new things, its novelty will soon wear off, and you will all grant what a wise young woman Dolly Vernon was, and what an admirable match she made.'

'I have been very bearish in my congratulations, Dolly,' murmured her little friend relentingly.

'Well, you have, rather, Fanny,' agreed that young lady, with a pleasant smile.

'And, of course, I like Captain Dasher very much, Dolly—I always did.'

'Oh, this is much better!' exclaimed Dolly cheerfully. 'Thank you, Fanny! And now, with that pleasant assurance ringing in my ears, let our conversation on this subject cease.'

And, in spite of many attempts made by Lady Francis Fairsmore during the following hour, no further conversation passed between them upon the subject of Dolly's engagement.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN AWKWARD DISCOVERY.

'And how it was I scarce can tell,
We seemed to please each other well.'

JEAN INGELOW.

AND thus it was that Dolly cleared the course of her new love, while Captain Dasher steadily, day by day, began to gain strength, and to become himself again. In truth, Dolly had rescued him from the very jaws of death, and Katherine, who at any time would have preferred Dolly to any other woman as a sister-in-law, now almost idolised her.

That Harry should be really engaged to be married seemed a marvellous thing to Katherine, who had always looked upon him as a confirmed bachelor, but that he was engaged to Dolly Vernon was certainly far more marvellous still. As Francis Fairsmore had said, it was such a very new idea.

A new idea it undeniably was, not only to Francis Fairsmore and Katherine Stainbury, but to everyone in Mudshire, and the weeks which followed the announcement of it were rather trying to all the people concerned in it, save one, and that one the man who, but a short time ago, had no inclination or wish to live, and who now looked upon his future life as a matter almost too blissful to be mentioned.

Like many another fellow-creature, who, from a cynical

point of view, for years has viewed the love affairs of his neighbours from a pinnacle, now that he had fallen a prey to the complaint himself, he had taken it very badly.

Possibly, if he had chanced to fall a victim to some other woman, the case might have been different; but then again it was highly improbable that any other woman save this one, who had treated him from her childhood as a friend pure and simple, would have been at all attractive to him. He had learnt to like her as a child, to be interested in her as the future wife of his especial friend, and to love her because, day by day, as friendship went on, he found something fresh and irresistibly attractive in her.

Then had come quite suddenly the realisation of the real state of his feelings for her, and with it the utter hopelessness of his case; then followed a long course of duty; next a moment of blissful belief that, after all, the course before him was a clear one; and afterwards, the knowledge that, however clear the course might be, the race was one in which he was not qualified to compete.

And now—now, by its very unexpectedness and improbability—the result was but the doubly dear.

And so at last—and the time seemed interminable to him before it came—came the day when Captain Dasher was moved on to a sofa in an upstairs sitting-room, which had been especially prepared for him, and he was pronounced convalescent, and ready to have an interview with Dolly.

He had not very long to wait, for Dolly had been warned that he was in an almost feverish state of excitement, and that the sooner she went to him the better it would be for him.

Dolly, who for weeks past had gone about with a serenely contented face, and apparently seemed perfectly satisfied with her future prospects, oddly enough felt both nervous and ill at ease as she wended her way to join her future husband. It was not the natural nervousness of a young, newly-engaged girl which had suddenly come over her, but the nervousness of uncertainty. Strange as it may seem, in the picture of her future which she had

mapped out for herself, she had overlooked the possibility of Captain Dasher's wishing to have any sentimental love scenes in it, and when her father spoke of his being in a state of feverish excitement, the information was a most uncomfortable shock to her.

Nor was Dolly so very much to be blamed for having viewed her engagement so practically. She had known Captain Dasher for years. Known him as a quiet, unsentimental, well-conducted sportsman, and, looking upon him from this standpoint, she had rather naturally overlooked the fact that, as well as being a sportsman, he was a man. She had pictured herself as making him a good, sensible wife, who could sympathise with his love of sport, attend to his comfort, keep his house just in the manner that he liked best, and view life from the calm, matter-of-fact standpoint which she believed to be the only one possible to him, and compatible with his nature. She firmly believed he wished to marry her because she could sympathise with him and understand him, not from a woman's point of view, but from a man's. And, of course, this suited her admirably. Love and sentiment were over for her; to marry a man who would expect her to display them was out of the question, and Captain Dasher was just the one man in the world who would appreciate her for not expecting or inflicting either the one or the other upon him.

Perhaps Dolly was not a very good judge of character; perhaps Captain Dasher was an anomaly; be that as it might, he was quite a different being to the one he had appeared to be, and Dolly had taken him for.

He had learnt to love her, because, of all the women he had ever met, she was quite the most womanly and lovable; because her eyes unconsciously betrayed the unusual depth and breadth of the heart which lay buried beneath them; and because she had simply and unquestionably the most beautiful face and the prettiest figure he had ever seen.

In a nervous, hesitating manner, Dolly entered the room where he was, and approached the sofa on which he lay.

The first doubt as to the prudence of the step which she had taken had come to her, and with it a sense of fear quite new to her. However, Dolly Vernon was not the sort of woman to let her inward quakings be apparent to her fellow-creatures, nor was she the woman to shirk a duty, or turn back after once having put her shoulder to the wheel.

With a soft, sympathetic smile, she laid her hand in his, looked down straight into his eyes, drew a chair close beside the sofa on which he lay, and, in an unembarrassed but affectionate tone, told him how thankful she was that he was better, and how glad she was to see him again.

For all reply, Captain Dasher's fingers closed firmly over hers, and held them captive, and his glance met hers until she looked away, suddenly overpowered by the expression of love which was written in them.

'Dolly,' he murmured at last, after a long pause. 'Dolly, my own darling, how can I ever thank you!'

Dolly silently returned the pressure of his hand, but her glance did not meet his. Not that she was feeling shy or abashed now, for a strange, unnatural calm had taken possession of her, a calm which, just at this juncture of affairs, was hardly befitting the occasion, and which made her feel very uncomfortable and uneasy.

'You have certainly nothing to thank me for, Harry,' she said gently, after a long pause.

'Nothing to thank you for, indeed! Certainly not, of course! Nothing at all!' was the soft, well-contented answer.

'I do hope I—I shall—be able to make you happy,' she exclaimed impulsively. 'I shall try my very best, dear.'

'God bless you for saying that, my darling,' was the earnest answer. 'I know you will; I know you are far too good for me. I do not deserve this, not by a long way!'

'Do not say that,' she returned sharply. 'At least not until you know all about me; not until I have told you all about it.'

'Nothing you can tell me could possibly alter my

opinion,' was the positive and assured reply, given with a smile of quiet amusement.

'I do not know that,' was the grave answer. 'I do not even know whether you will wish to go on with our engagement when I have explained things clearly to you.'

'Explained things?'

'Yes. You see I could not explain them before. I may have acted wrongly, but I wanted you—to get well.'

'My dearest!' returned Captain Dasher softly. 'And are these terrible disclosures really necessary to your happiness?'

'Perfectly so,' was the decided answer.

'Some bygone little love affair?' suggested Captain Dasher gently, with a smile. 'I conclude so. And do you not think it unnecessary to rake it up? To me it is a matter of absolute indifference. I am quite sure I can have no objection to any flirtation of yours.'

'Am I such an especially exalted being?' inquired Dolly softly. 'Do I inspire you with confidence? I wonder why?'

'I have not known you since your childhood for nothing, Dolly; and had I never seen you until yesterday, I would have staked my life and honour on the fact that your face was one to be implicitly relied upon.'

'I am afraid you think more highly of me than I deserve,' returned Dolly gravely. And then she explained the whole of that unfortunate love affair of hers to him in a clear, concise manner.

'My poor little girl!' said Captain Dasher, at the end of it, in a low and extremely sympathetic tone of voice; 'my poor, darling little girl!'

Now, sympathy was a thing Dolly seldom heard expressed. She never encouraged it, and, like many other people who do not encourage it, she was supposed to be rather cold and unsympathetic; whereas it was, in reality, over-sensitiveness, and a knowledge of that over-sensitiveness, which made her avoid and dread it.

Captain Dasher's manner of treating a matter which would certainly have been an unexpected and unpleasant discovery to most men placed in his position, touched

Dolly greatly. She respected him for it; she was very grateful to him for it. But his pity hurt her inexpressibly, because it made her feel sorry for herself, and it raised an unwelcome and alarming picture before her mental view—a picture of the past. In an instant, past and present stood revealed before her; and, alas! instead of contrasting a good man and a bad one, a sense of acute pain overpowered her, in the realisation that love had gone for ever out of her life, never by any possibility to return, and that nothing—nothing in the world could ever compensate for its loss, or fill up the blank it left behind it.

Luckily, Captain Dasher was too well satisfied with the turn his affairs had taken, and too overpowered by the happiness her presence afforded him, to be in an exacting humour just then, and he was quite contented to hold her hand in his in silence. And, by-and-by, Dolly regained her self-possession.

'You still want me to marry you?' she asked presently, in a very low voice.

'Dolly!' he exclaimed reproachfully.

'I am glad,' she said simply. 'I think we shall suit each other.'

For a long time she sat beside him, talking to him, and, as he listened to her sweet, musical voice, and watched the ever-varying expressions that flitted over her face, and the quick, quiet, graceful movements of her lovely figure, Captain Dasher was a supremely happy man. This girl who had promised to marry him was his ideal of what a woman should be. Quiet in her manner, clever, sensible, pleasant to look at, amusing to talk to, straightforward in everything she said or did—a lady in the very truest and most comprehensive sense of the word, and most thoroughly lovable in every way,—so lovable, indeed, that by-and-by Captain Dasher began to wish that he felt a trifle less bashful, and that he dare ask her to move her chair just a little nearer him. Nothing could have been nicer or kinder than her manner. It was sympathetic, frank and affectionate; but, somehow, much as he was tempted to make that request, and

thoroughly as he realised that he had a perfect right to do so, Captain Dasher found it not only a difficult, but an almost impossible matter. It was not until at last she rose to leave him, her mind full of self-congratulations, and thoroughly impressed by the idea that he was an exceptionally nice and sensible man, and that it would be very easy for her to get on beautifully with him, that he found the courage of despair. In another moment she would have gone! Now or never!—or rather, until another day, which seemed pretty much the same thing to him in his present state of mind. He held the hand she offered him resolutely, glanced up a nervous but beseeching manner, and gently drew her towards him.

'Won't—you—let—me kiss you, Dolly, darling?' he whispered, in a low and very humble voice.

Dolly flushed crimson, and then slowly all the colour left her face, until it was very white indeed. It was all over in a few seconds—her hesitation, her flush of emotion, and the reaction which followed it.

'Yes, dear,' she replied quite quietly, 'of course I will.' And, without further ado, she leant over him and offered her cheek for the purpose proposed.

But Captain Dasher, who knew nothing save that Dolly had blushed, and that her pretty face was near his own, was not to be so easily satisfied at this. His recent bashfulness had gone—that first difficult step was taken, and without a moment's hesitation his arm went round her waist, and he drew her down beside him, and kissed her, not once, but many times, in a manner that surprised her very considerably.

'I love you!—I love you!—I love you, darling!' he exclaimed passionately, as he held her closely to him.

Dolly Vernon said never a word. She submitted unresistingly to his caresses, and when he asked her to do so, she kissed him. Not by one little sign did she betray to him the tumult which was storming within her; but when at last she left the room, it was with a white, miserable face, and with an expression in her eyes which, had he seen it, would have pained him inexpressibly.

'False!—false to myself and to him!' she murmured

to herself, as soon as she was alone. 'Heaven help me! I seem always to be doing something wrong. I see it all now. This is impossible—I cannot carry it through! No; it is out of the question that I can carry it through. I ought to have known—Oh, I ought to have known how it would be!'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A TERRIBLE BUSINESS.

'Oh the merry, laughing comrade,
Oh, the true and kindly friend,
Glowing hopes and lofty courage,
Love and life, and this the end.'

WHYTE MELVILLE.

'DOLLY!'

'Yes, Dads!' she exclaimed, starting up, and looking up at him in a troubled, anxious manner.

Something was evidently wrong. The hour was somewhere between midnight and dawn; and her father's face was expressive of strong emotion as he stood by her bedside, holding a flat candlestick in a trembling hand.

'What is the matter, Dads?' repeated Dolly, now fully awake. 'Is the house on fire?'

'No, my child. I wish it was,' was the troubled, nervous answer.

'It is Harry Dasher,' she exclaimed, in a low, decided tone of voice; 'he is worse.'

'Yes, Dolly.'

'Have you sent for the doctor?'

'Yes, dear. He is here.'

'What has happened? Is he very bad? But, there, I know it. What is wrong?'

'His lung.'

'Oh, Dads!' she cried sharply; 'he is dead!'

Squire Vernon said never a word, but he sat down on the edge of her bed, and took her hand in his.

'Dead,' she repeated, brokenly—'dead, Dads! And I was thinking of breaking off my engagement only a few

hours ago; I have behaved disgracefully to him, and he —is dead!'

And then, by-and-by, the Squire told her all about it. How he had rung his bell about one o'clock in the morning, and how the nurse had hurriedly answered it, and found him in an alarmingly dangerous condition. How he had never been able to explain anything coherently; but it had been concluded that he had felt restless, and got out of bed to fetch a book which they found lying beside him, and how, owing to this exertion, he had brought on the relapse, which, at one time, had been momentarily expected, but which, latterly, they had all hoped was no longer to be feared. He had died very shortly after the doctor's arrival, at about two o'clock, and he had clearly given them to understand that neither Dolly nor his sister were to be roused.

'Poor Harry! Oh, I am sorry! I think he would have liked to see me,' said Dolly brokenly, on hearing this.

'No, my darling, no,' returned her father quickly. 'It would have been painful for him as well as you. He did not wish it.'

'Oh, Dads, how dreadful! How terribly dreadful it all is. I can see it all just as it was that terrible day. Why, I had no idea that there was any fear of a relapse. He might have brought it on when I was with him to-day. He sat up once, and, oh, poor Harry, I cannot bear to think of it! How thoughtless I was.'

'All danger was supposed to be over, Dolly; you must not blame yourself in any way. You—you did your best for him, darling. You made these last few weeks very happy for him.'

'Oh, I might have done so much more; I kept away until to-day, and—and—but I could not have done otherwise, dear—could I? I never—we never dreamt that he was not going to recover? Oh, Dads, I am so glad I did not say anything to-day. I am so thankful that he never knew that I had realised I did not love him. He knows all about it now; but he will not mind it now, will he?'

Suddenly Dolly stopped. A look of acute pain rested upon her face.

'No, he will not mind now. And I do love him, oh, I love him now.'

And so she did. Not with an earthly love, but with the pure, tender love a warm, loving heart can always give in a time of trouble.

'I am glad poor Katherine was not there,' she said presently. 'I am glad she was spared it. She may regret it, but she does not know,—I am glad I never told her how it was that day. Poor Katherine, she will feel it terribly as it is.'

'Yes, indeed, poor thing. Fred is with her now,' murmured the Squire.

'Nothing could have saved him? you knew what to do at once?'

'Oh yes! yes! Nothing could stop it this time; you see he was in such a low state to begin with, poor fellow. Simsby always said a relapse must prove fatal. But that it should have come after the fear of it had passed—poor Dasher, we shall all miss him terribly. It will make a blank that will never be filled in for some of us.'

'Never,' whispered Dolly; 'there will never be a second Captain Dasher.'

'George is here,' said her father, after a short pause. 'We sent for him at once, and he arrived half-an-hour before Simsby did.'

'Oh, I am glad of that.'

'Yes,' agreed her father.

Just then there was a noise in the passage outside Dolly's door, and it was suddenly thrown open. Another second, and a girlish figure in a long, light-coloured dressing-gown rushed into the room, and Katherine Stainbury, with a wild cry of despair, had thrown herself headlong into Dolly's arms.

'He loved you, Dolly! Oh, he loved you, darling. And they kept us both away! It was cruel,—cruel!' she gasped hysterically.

The Squire had noiselessly left the room, and the two girls were alone. Until the following morning it was

Dolly's mission to soothe and try to comfort Harry Dasher's sister. A painful and practically impossible matter, for not only was Katherine devoted to her only brother, but she had absolutely no control over her feelings ; a very child, in so far that she was unaccustomed to any real trouble, and was quite unfit to bear it.

And then, at last, when that sad and awful night was over, when Katherine, worn out with grief, had fallen asleep on Dolly's bed, and was lying there in a blissful state of unconsciousness, Dolly stole away and left her.

Throughout Mudshire the news of Captain Dasher's death spread like wildfire that day. Throughout Mudshire a gloom was cast, and far and wide echoed the opinion given to his daughter by the M. F. H., that a blank had been made amongst them which no new-comer would ever fill in again for some of them.

For some days the Muddleton did not hunt, and the M. F. H.'s Daughter was not seen in the hunting field again that season. That tribute to his memory was the least the Muddleton could pay him, and, certainly, was his due ; but it was in the after years, when 'poor Dasher's' exploits were gone over one by one by the Muddletonites, and when 'poor Dasher' was mentioned to some new member of the hunt as the best fellow and the hardest rider they had ever had amongst them, that it was proved how truly they had liked him, and how greatly he was missed.

'No one but "poor Dasher" ever got over the Westby brook in the hollow there,' one old pal of his would say to another in after years, and there was no use in your telling them you had seen it done, because they would have turned a deaf ear to your remark, in that persistent and determined manner which old people know so well how to adopt at convenient moments. Nor yet would you have gained anything had you performed the feat yourself under their very noses, for they would have looked at you with eyes which would not see.

Let us leave them, and the man they honour, and not call them 'prosy,' or 'old fogies;' there may come a time when we would wish to have just such faithful friends as they are, and when we also are no longer young.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DOLLY RECEIVES A LETTER.

'Oft, when clouds on clouds
Compass us round, and not a track appears;
Oft is an upright heart the surest guide,
Surer and better than the subtlest head,
Still, with its silent counsels, through the dark,
Onward and onward leading.'—ROGERS.

AND now, because nothing of any importance happened during that time, we must pass over a year and a half of Dolly's life. At one-and-twenty the M. F. H.'s Daughter was still Miss Vernon; and, as her father shrewdly suspected, she had for some time past put aside the marriage question as impracticable.

Her short engagement to poor Captain Dasher had been a lasting lesson to her. She had admired and liked him as much as it was in her nature to admire or like anyone, and she had hoped that she loved him,—not as she had loved before, but in a sensible, rational manner, likely to be satisfactory to them both. And then, that day before his death, she had been rudely undeceived as to the real state of her feelings, and she had realised fully, once and for all, the serious but unquestionable fact that love is very far from being a sensible or rational matter; that it makes equal fools of us all, wise and foolish alike; that it comes and goes at its own sweet will; and that, although it can pursue us like a shadow when it is not wanted, it can never be persuaded to put in an appearance in a business-like, satisfactory manner when it is really desirable that it should do so.

And so Dolly quietly put all thought of love and marriage aside after Captain Dasher's death. The two went together, and must not be separated. Her life had been a happy one outside that part of it over which Master Cupid had had dominion, and so, being wise in her generation, she determined to have no further traffic with that tiresome and obtrusive young gentleman; although she knew full well that, tiresome and obtrusive as he was, he held the best part of her life in his grasp.

In spite of this suspicion on the part of her father, he still hoped that time, with its other many changes, would alter this decision of Dolly's, and that, by-and-by, George's true and deep devotion for her might soften her heart, and win its love. Whether George Ventnor shared this hope of the Squire's, or he was resigned to the existing state of affairs, was an open question. He loved her still, just as he had done from the first—with a love that looked neither to the right nor the left, and had nothing outside it or beyond it—with the one and only real love of his life.

Perhaps George had given his case up as hopeless, judging truly that love is not to be won by degrees, or by the most perfect of devotions; that the heart of such a woman as the M. F. H.'s Daughter could only be taken by storm, and that to try to win it by a long and persevering siege was a quite impossible undertaking. Be that as it might be, his friendship for her and his conduct towards her were quite unchanged.

On the day this chapter opens, Dolly was sitting working near an open window in the drawing-room of her father's house in Brook Street.

The two years which had passed since last we saw her had not altered her either one way or the other, as far as appearances went. At nineteen, she had looked like a young woman, whose age might have been anywhere between twenty-five and thirty, and at twenty-one, that was still the impression you would have received about her. Often it is so, that girls, who look women while still in their teens, alter little as time goes on, and at thirty, or even forty, still retain a youthful appearance, long departed from many of their contemporaries; not that Dolly Vernon had as yet passed the age in which it was her right to look youthful.

On this day in question, although, as a rule, her disposition was one not much given to depression, she was feeling anything but bright or cheerful. A bad head-cold seldom has a pleasing effect upon one, and, owing either to this fact or another shortly to be noticed, she was feeling low and out of spirits. By way of making things more cheerful, she had laid aside a novel, in

which there were five murders and a case of attempted suicide, about ten minutes ago, and had taken up her work, and a train of thoughts which, much against her will and sense of what was fitting, had been occupying her mind in a most persistent manner for the last four-and-twenty hours. She did not know how or why it was that ever since the morning of the previous day her brain had kept dwelling upon Jack Denham.

Never since that dreadful discovery she had made about him had she willingly allowed herself to think of him. For a long time past the wish to do so had died a natural death; and yet, in an irritating, haunting manner, the thought of him was now following her like a shadow.

Yesterday she had thought of him all the time at Lords; he had seemed to be close beside her as she rode in the park; all through a rather gay and pleasant dinner-party, the same shadow had still pursued her; and, long afterwards, when worn out and tired with dancing in the early hours of dawn, she had at last gone to bed and wished to sleep, the thought of her old lover had kept her restless and wakeful until getting-up time. Even now, in spite of the five murders and the case of attempted suicide, as soon as she took up her work she began to think of him again.

It was provoking, tiresome, annoying; and, feeling very angry with herself for her lack of will to put the thought aside, she began to tap the tips of her little shoes impatiently against the low stool on which her feet were resting.

Just then the door opened, and Price, who has grown considerably stouter since last we saw him, entered, and slowly proceeded to cross the room towards her.

On a salver, which he carried in his hand, was a letter, which he presently handed to her. Dolly took the letter, and, before opening it, glanced up inquiringly at him, for it was evident that he had some communication to make.

'Well, Price?'

'A young woman brought that letter, miss, and she

is waiting for an answer. I fancy it is a begging case, and I hope I have not done wrong in bringing it up,' he informed her, with that confidential air, which old servants evidently consider a part and parcel of their duty.

'It will be all right, Price. I will ring.'

'I hope as it is not a begging letter,' murmured the old man to himself as he retired.

Now Price had a reason for hoping the letter was not a begging case. Miss Vernon's heart was made of the very warmest and most generous material imaginable, and trouble or poverty appealed to it, and moved it very deeply. This had become a fact very well known and understood. Beggars and begging letters were sure to meet with sympathy from the M. F. H.'s Daughter; she gave not only her sympathy, but her money away in a rather indiscriminate manner, saying she would far rather assist one sufferer and a dozen impostors than leave the sufferer unaided. Now, this trait in Dolly's character was a very admirable one in the abstract, but in her father's opinion it was beginning to be rather too widely and well known. He was very charitably inclined himself, and just the sort of man who prefers to give away a sovereign to a shilling; but, at the same time, he had no great love for imposition, and the matter had ended in his quietly giving Price a hint that, if all begging letters were given to him, it would not displease him.

And thus it was that Price was placed in what he considered to be a very responsible position, for a butler who had always lived 'in the best of families' could not afford to make any mistakes over a matter of this kind, or to have it supposed that he did not know a begging letter when he saw one.

This letter, which he had just delivered, and the bearer of it, had puzzled him not a little. The young woman who brought it did not seem unlike a domestic maid-servant, but then, again, she certainly was not a domestic maid-servant from one of those best of family establishments with which Price was so intimately acquainted.

She was one of those half-dowdy, half-smart, wholly

unattractive-looking young women, who may be anything between a maid-of-all-work, or a parlour house-maid from one of those many uninteresting, unfashionable-looking streets with which all towns abound, and which are looked upon with silent contempt by such a man as Price.

Yes, as soon as he saw her, he put her down for just what she was, with the unerring judgment of a man whose worldly knowledge was naturally great; but then, as he asked himself perplexedly, what connection could there possibly be between the mistress of this family drudge and his master's daughter.

For the letter was addressed in a woman's handwriting; not exactly a lady's handwriting—Price had come to the conclusion, as he turned it over in a meditative manner, before deciding that he would deliver it to Miss Vernon, but yet not the handwriting of an uneducated person—no; it was too carefully, too well-written, to have come from the pen of a fashionable lady; possibly it was from some old governess of his young mistress's; but then, again, that could not be the case, since Price knew the handwriting of all Miss Vernon's past governesses intimately.

So, hoping it was not a begging letter, Price finally delivered it into Dolly's hands.

And, as it turned out, it was a begging letter after all, and, what was worse, by far the most inopportune and important begging letter that had ever been handed in at the M. F. H.'s door.

It was from a woman, as Price had divined, and from a woman whose handwriting Miss Vernon had never seen before.

There was not much interest expressed upon Dolly's face as she opened the envelope of that letter; but as she read it, her face suddenly flushed crimson, grew pale, flushed scarlet again, and then again grew pale; her breath came at long intervals in hurried catches, and all the outward signs of acute emotion became visible, with an almost alarming rapidity.

Never before, and never afterwards, did the M. F. H.'s Daughter receive a letter which caused her half so much

excitement or perplexity as one delivered into Price's hands by that despised family drudge.

And, looking over Dolly's shoulder as she perused it, let us now read that letter :—

'DEAR MISS VERNON,—I hope you will pardon the liberty I take in thus addressing you. I know that Colonel Vernon used to be one of my husband's best friends, or I would not venture to write to you. I have seen in the papers that you have arrived in London for the season. I am in terrible trouble, and very ill. My husband is abroad with his regiment, and I do not know whom to turn to, or what to do. My husband has often told me how good and kind Miss Vernon is, will she come and see me? I am in such dreadful trouble, so please, please do come to me.—Yours faithfully,

'EMILY DENHAM.

'NO. 7 ASHAM ST., SOUTH KENSINGTON.'

Not long did Dolly Vernon sit there, overpowered by the strange and powerful emotion the perusal of this letter had caused her. Presently, with it in her hand, she rose and rang the bell.

'Is Colonel Vernon in?' she asked quietly, as soon as Price appeared in the doorway.

'No, miss; he went out about half-an-hour ago.'

'In the hansom?'

'No, miss; the Colonel went out on foot.'

'Very well. If he has not ordered it to meet him anywhere, order the hansom at once for me; if he has ordered it, say I shall require the Victoria.'

'Yes, miss.'

'And there is no answer, Price.'

'Very well, miss.'

And with that Price disappeared.

Now, Price was a very excellent servant, but he had lived in Colonel Vernon's service ever since Dolly had been a baby, and he had begun to look upon everything belonging to his master as his own personal property. Everything the M. F. H. or his Daughter did was a matter of importance and consideration to Price; so, as he disappeared downstairs again, he let his mind dwell

inquiringly upon Dolly's evident agitation and extreme pallor. Naturally he felt rather aggrieved to find that the cause of it was a profound mystery to him.

Her orders had been prompt, and delivered in that quick, decided manner habitual to her; but, nevertheless, it had been perfectly apparent to Price that something very unusual had happened to disturb her.

He would have liked dearly to have questioned the woman who had brought that letter; but, be it noted to his credit, he refrained from doing so; delivered Miss Vernon's message, and allowed the messenger to depart in peace.

Like master, like man. Nearly a quarter of a century spent in Colonel Vernon's service had taught Price to see many little matters from a rather high and superior point of view. Just as any right-minded gentleman would have done, did the Squire's butler refrain from asking the bearer of Miss Vernon's letter where she came from, and why she had come; and, just as very few servants would have done, did he refrain from commenting upon the strange agitation and pallor of his master's daughter to his chosen friend and confidant, Mrs Elliotson, the housekeeper.

Meanwhile, Dolly, unconscious of the excessive pallor of her face, and believing that her inward agitation was carefully concealed from view, went quickly up to her room and rang her bell.

'I want a hat—oh, I don't care which, a black one,—and some gloves; and then, Houghton, please go and get ready to come out with me at once. My boots! Oh, I will put them on myself, thanks.'

'It will not take me a minute, madam, and I can be ready directly,' urged Houghton respectfully, with the button-hook in her hand.

Dolly smiled. Far as she was from being in a smiling humour, her natural courtesy to those beneath her mechanically enforced her to bestow a pleasant smile upon her ladies'-maid, as she quietly took the button-hook out of her hand.

'Thank you, Houghton. I can also do it in a minute, when I try. Please go at once. I must leave the house as soon as possible,' she returned, hurriedly, but graciously.

But Dolly could not do it in a minute, as she discovered to her cost. Whether it was that the button was badly sewn on, or that her agitation caused her hand to shake in an unnatural manner, is uncertain ; but the fact remains, that, in her hurry, she wielded that silver button-hook of hers so badly that she wrenched a button off the first boot she experimented upon, and had, in consequence to waste several minutes in finding another pair. This time, out of patience with her button-hook, she selected a pair of laced Russian leather shoes, and hardly had she tied the last one on before Houghton, neatly equipped in a black jacket and bonnet, entered the room again.

A few minutes later, accompanied by Houghton, Dolly left the door of No. 10 Brook Street in her father's private hansom.

Never for a minute had she hesitated about taking the rather important step which now confronted her. On all subjects her mind was always made up in a resolute and decided manner, at a moment's notice ; and the course she had now taken seemed to her not only to be the right one, but absolutely the only one open to her. Nevertheless, as she drove rapidly along, she felt unusually nervous, and her face was still of that peculiar vividly white hue which had, half-an-hour ago, attracted Price's attention, and greatly excited his curiosity.

She could not have analysed her feelings just then had she tried ; and it rather surprised her than otherwise to find how strangely she was agitated by the fact that she was shortly going to meet Jack Denham's wife. That it had been given her to be able to be of use to the woman whom she had unconsciously wronged was a source of deep satisfaction to her ; but that she was interested in Emily Denham, apart from this, and in so far that she was the wife of the man she had once loved, never even crossed her mind. At least, not just then.

Soon afterwards, when, having left Houghton waiting in the hall, and her father's hansom at the door of No. 7 Asham Street, Dolly found herself standing alone in Mrs Denham's drawing-room, a suspicion of the truth flashed before her.

On the mantelshelf reposed a photograph of Captain

Denham. It was one which Dolly had never seen before.

Looking straight into hers were the large, expressive eyes, so heavily fringed by dark curling lashes, into which she had not looked for four years, and which it had taken the greater part of those four years to enable her to cast aside the remembrance of, in at all a satisfactory manner. Meeting the direct gaze of them now, Dolly Vernon coloured warmly, greatly to her inward indignation. Indignant she might be, but prevent that sudden flush she could not; for something funny seemed to have happened in the region of her heart.

Instantly, she turned her back upon that photograph, and in doing so, came face to face with another—a large one in a glass frame on a table near her. Very handsome did Captain John Denham look in that full-length, large-sized photograph. His hussar uniform fitted his tall, well-made figure to perfection, and, with his handsome face above it, he looked an extremely fascinating and gentlemanly man.

Dolly, who had been taken unawares by the sight of the first photograph, had by this time sharply reprimanded herself for having permitted the sight of it to affect her either one way or the other, and now stood facing this second one with a stolid, determined expression upon her face; and a resolution not to either avoid the sight of it, or allow herself to feel in the least agitated by it, strong within her.

Of course, he was exceptionally good-looking, and equally, of course, to her shame, she used to love him; but surely she could look at the photograph of a handsome man without blushing, and surely she had long since been the complete mistress of her own heart.

So thought Dolly Vernon, forgetting to question herself as to how it was that she had found poor Harry Dasher's caresses so wholly repulsive, or why she had so firmly resolved to put aside, as impracticable, the question of love and marriage.

The maid-servant who had ushered her into the room did not return; the clock on the mantelshelf ticked on, and then struck twelve. Dolly had by this time lost all sense of agitation, and was feeling very quiet and subdued

Five minutes past twelve; and then, just as she was beginning to feel very solitary and lonely, she suddenly became aware of the fact that she was not alone in the room, and that, evidently, ever since her entrance into it she had had a silent and very small companion.

Seated, and almost buried in the cushions of a large arm-chair near the window, was a little child, with very dark brown hair, and a pair of large, violet-blue eyes, which were fixed upon the M. F. H.'s Daughter in a nervous but inquiring stare.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HIS WIFE AND CHILD.

'The leaves that nighest heaven are seen,
By every breeze are stirr'd.'

OWEN MEREDITH.

FOR a few seconds Dolly's eyes and the child's met, and they gazed at each other in mute surprise.

Those large, deep blue eyes; where, ah! where had Dolly Vernon last seen and looked into them!

For a minute the question of what she was going to do next, and what remark she was going to make to the solemn-faced little girl, who had apparently been watching her absorbedly for the last quarter of an hour, was undecided in Dolly's mind; and then, quite suddenly, with a curious quivering expression on her face, she took a few hurried steps towards the window.

By nature, she was neither impulsive nor emotional; but, somehow or other, she found herself kneeling down before the chair in which the child was sitting, and, much to its surprise and consternation, she had clasped its little figure closely in her arms.

Never a word did she utter—never a word said the child. For quite a minute she held it thus, and the little girl, who at first had been seriously alarmed by the sudden and strange attack made upon it by a stranger, gained confidence as the moments passed, and she still found herself within the circle of those soft, loving arms.

'You poor little thing,' murmured Dolly at last. 'How is it that you are all alone here?'

And then, not waiting for an answer, Dolly got up, and raising her up in her arms, sat down in the chair she had been occupying, and seated her comfortably upon her knee.

Again the violet-blue eyes gazed questioningly into the large grey ones for several seconds in silence.

'Who was this stranger? Was she to be trusted?' Yes; the unerring instinct of childhood answered an emphatic yes to that latter question.

Having decided that mental inquiry to her satisfaction, the little girl with the dark hair and blue eyes next decided to answer the one Dolly had asked her.

'My mamma is ill,' she said very gravely, and as if that fact fully accounted for her solitary condition.

'Not very ill, I hope, dear. I have come to see her,' returned Dolly gently.

'Have you?' was the solemn reply.

'Yes. I think she must be asleep,' returned Dolly thoughtfully. 'What is your name?'

'Dorothy.'

'Dorothy,' repeated Dolly slowly; 'Dorothy.' And then suddenly for a passing moment a touch of crimson flitted across her white face, and left behind it a dash of pale, soft rose.

'Will you make my mamma well?' asked little Dorothy, in a pathetic manner, after a slight pause.

'Yes, darling, of course I will,' replied Dolly, quite cheerfully; 'that is just what I have come here to do.'

But as she spoke thus cheerfully, her arms drew the child closely to her, and her heart was full to overflowing with the thought of what might be in store for her.

'I love you,' returned Dorothy, smiling for the first time. 'I love you for making my mamma well.'

After this, for a few seconds, conversation lagged a little. Then, quite suddenly, the child asked Dolly what her name was.

'Dolly,' was the simple answer.

'Dolly!' repeated the child slowly. 'Dolly! How funny!'

But Dolly Vernon did not inquire why it was funny, nor did she think it so. She was not quite sure whether she was indignant or glad to find that Jack Denham had given his little girl a name so remarkably like her own.

'Dolly,' murmured little Dorothy. 'Dolly—that is what my mamma calls me.'

'Would you please to walk upstairs?' said a voice in the doorway at that moment.

'Yes,' replied Miss Vernon quietly, rising as she spoke, and placing little Dorothy upon her feet.

'Oh, take me with you, please!' exclaimed a pitiful voice behind her, as she was leaving the room.

For a second Dolly hesitated, that mute appeal had touched her to the heart.

'Will I do wrong in doing so?' she inquired of the servant.

'Oh, no, Miss; she's mostly there,' replied the woman; and then Dolly once again took the child in her arms, and proceeded on her way with her.

It was thus, with little Dorothy in her arms, that Dolly Vernon found herself in Mrs Denham's room.

A terribly wan, white face, resting on a rumpled, uncomfortable-looking pillow, was turned towards her, and a pair of eyes, which appeared to be far too big for the thin, hollow cheeks beneath them, gazed, with an intensely anxious expression in them, straight up into her face.

Slowly a smile, a very faint smile, passed over Emily Denham's lips. A smile, so inexpressibly full of past anguish and present relief, that, in a moment, the sight of it brought large, sympathetic tears into Dolly's eyes.

'Thank God,' murmured Mrs Denham, and then, without further ado, closed her eyes, and lapsed into a death-like faint.

By every means in her power did Dolly try to bring her round. The case seemed apparently hopeless; and at last, for a moment, she left Houghton, who she had called to her assistance, in charge of her, and scribbled a hasty line to one of the best doctors in town, urging him to come at once to No. 7 Asham Street.

'Go yourself in the hansom with it!' she exclaimed to

Houghton. 'Make Bond drive as fast as he can, and give it yourself into Dr Fairbrains's hands. Urge him to come at once; she may be dying.'

'She is dying,' replied Houghton solemnly. 'It's the decline, madam; my mother went the same way,' and then, without another, she hurried away to do her mistress's bidding.

They had forgotten the very existence of the child in their confusion. Huddled up at the foot of the bed, it had been watching their proceedings so quietly and silently that they had ceased to remember that it was there.

No sooner had the door closed upon Houghton's departing figure than it brought itself under Dolly's notice by flinging its arms round the neck of its unconscious mother, and uttering a wail of dire distress.

Too young to know what they meant by 'dying,' Dorothy was, nevertheless, quite old enough to know that something alarming had happened, and that this new friend of hers, and the woman who was with her, had been prophesying some terrible trouble for her and her mamma.

Finding her mother unresponsive, her grief and fear increased; and the scene which followed, during the next five minutes, left a deep and painful impression upon Dolly Vernon until her dying day.

At last it was over; the child's grief had worn itself out, her fears were lulled to rest; a young woman who seemed to be her nurse, by her manner of addressing her, had persuaded her to leave the room, and Dolly found herself alone with the unconscious, dying woman.

Presently, there were signs of returning consciousness; the lids of those unnaturally large eyes began to quiver, and a very feeble voice asked for a spoonful of the medicine which was in a bottle by the bedside.

The nurse, who apparently acted as the mother's attendant as well as the child's, had previously informed Dolly that, as soon as the 'missus' came to, she must give her some of this medicine, adding, that it always brought her round 'wonderful quick,' so Dolly instantly obeyed Mrs Denham's request, and was both relieved and surprised by the result.

The result was this, that a few minutes later on, Mrs Denham, although even more ghastly white than before, was quite conscious again, and was lying back upon the comfortable-looking pillows which Dolly had quickly and deftly arranged for her.

'You must not talk yet,' said the girl, in a tone so decided that Emily Denham never even thought of disobeying her request, but lay silently watching her tall, graceful figure as she quietly moved about the room, arranging it, as she had done the pillows, so deftly and quickly that, in a very few minutes, from its being a very chaos of discomfort it was reduced to a state of order, pleasing to both the mind and eye. That done, the bedclothes gently straightened, and Dolly's hat deposited upon a table near the window, she approached the bed, and sat down in a chair close to it.

'Thank you,' murmured Emily Denham, in a low very quivering tone. 'Miss Vernon, how can I ever thank you for this?'

'For this?' repeated Dolly softly. 'This is nothing. Do not try.'

'Oh, I was so lonely—so terribly lonely!' returned Mrs Denham, in that pitifully childish manner which in old days had won her husband's heart, and which now found its way to Dolly's.

'You poor little thing!' murmured Dolly sympathetically, passing her hand along the counterpane until it reached one of hers, and held it captive lovingly. 'Have you no relations—no friends?'

'None!' replied Mrs Denham, with a little sob.

'This will not do, dear; indeed, it will not,' returned Dolly soothingly. 'You have me, you know, so you must not give way like this now. Why did you not send for me before?'

'Oh, I dared not; indeed, I did not dare! It was only the knowledge that I am dying, and the thought of my—'

'Don't!' interrupted Dolly, almost sharply, her lip quivering strangely as she spoke.

'But, oh! Miss Vernon, what is to become of her?'

'If—but you are going to get well.'

'Impossible! The doctor told me so,' replied Emily Denham, calmer in her manner than Dolly had yet seen her; and then, suddenly flushing hectically, she exclaimed, in gasping tones, 'And what will become of my child? my little—'

'If it should be so, will you leave her with me?' asked Dolly, very quietly.

Never a thought did she give to the grave importance of her words to herself. The suggestion she had made seemed not only to be best, but the only possible one to be made under the existing circumstances.

'To you?' repeated Mrs Denham. 'Do you mean to say that you will take her—you, yourself?'

'If you will let me,' said Dolly.

'God bless you!' cried the dying woman. 'God bless you, Miss Vernon! It is the not the first time I have had reason to say that. You cannot know how often I have said it. Oh, you are good—you are good! Thank God!—Thank God!'

Dolly leant forward, and, without a word, took the sobbing, quivering, emaciated form into her arms, and soothed it there as if it was a child's.

In the confusion of the moment, she took little notice of the fact that Mrs Denham evidently knew all about the past. She was glad of it—glad that she and the dying woman understood each other; inexpressibly glad to find that she looked upon her as a friend.

'I will love her, dear,' she murmured soothingly,—I will love her!'

And Emily Denham, resting in those soft, loving arms, never for a moment doubted this blissful promise. The lovely face so near her own was unquestionably one to be thoroughly trusted; and no one listening to Dolly Vernon's voice could have doubted for a moment the reliability of its owner. So thought Emily Denham—and she was right.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THEIR FIRST DISPUTE.

'Once in a golden hour,
I cast to earth a seed,
Up there came a flower,
The people said, a weed.'

TENNYSON.

MEANWHILE, confusion was reigning in the Squire's house in Brook Street.

At the very time when Dolly was promising Mrs Denham that she would take charge of little Dorothy, Lady Goodhaven was leaning forward in her carriage, talking to her father's butler. On her handsome face there rested a heavy frown of annoyance, and her voice expressed not a little sharpness and impatience.

'Out!' she exclaimed sharply, 'out, Price! Are you sure of it?'

'Yes, my lady.'

'And did she say nothing as to when she would return?'

'No, my lady.'

'Do you know where she has gone?'

'No, my lady.'

'But Miss Vernon promised to be ready at one o'clock, and it is ten minutes past that time already!' was the petulant rejoinder.

The Countess of Goodhaven, ever since her childhood, had been noted for the shortness of her temper, and now that she held the proud position of a spoilt, popular beauty, she allowed the veriest trifles to upset her equanimity, and, as it happened, this was not a trifle which was now disturbing her; she had made an arrangement for the afternoon to drive to Hurlingham, to watch a polo match in which her brother-in-law, Gerald Stainbury, was playing, an arrangement which at first glance seems so very simple, unexciting, and praiseworthy, that one cannot fail to at once suspect that Florence Goodhaven had another motive hidden under her sense of duty towards her husband's family.

And the motive lay in the fact that she was to go under the escort of Lord Edward Winterpoole, a young

gentleman who made himself remarkable by his devotions to the fairer sex, and who, at least so it was said, had really singed his wings at last in the fire which shone and sparkled in Lady Goodhaven's large, dark eyes.

Dolly was to play propriety; a fact her sister had carefully kept from that young lady's knowledge. Even with Dolly, Lady Goodhaven had questioned the strict prudence of the step she was taking, in the face of the hot and raging gossip which was just then at its height; but if Dolly failed her, she had sense enough and self-esteem enough to see that the whole thing would have to fall through.

'Did Miss Vernon go out with the Colonel, Price?'

'No, my lady; Houghton accompanied her.'

'In the carriage?'

'The hansom, my lady.'

'You must know where she ordered the man to go first?'

'I forget the address, my lady. It was Kensington way.'

'Kensington!' exclaimed her ladyship, 'Kensington, Price? What on earth could she want to go Kensington way for?'

Price, standing on the pavement, naturally looked as if perfectly unconscious of this last exclamation; but a tall, fair-haired very spic-and-spanly attired gentleman, who happened to be passing by on foot at that moment, turned his face with a smile towards the speaker, and raised his hat.

'I am in luck's way, Lady Goodhaven,' he exclaimed, in a remarkably pleasant voice, and then, with a slight flush on his fair, handsome face, he took in his the small, delicately-gloved hand she offered him, and held it there a few seconds longer than was strictly necessary.

'It is more than I am, then,' was the rather curt rejoinder. 'You are on your way to me, I presume, so you may as well get in.'

This permission, given not over-graciously, brought another little flush into Lord Edward's rather boyish face. He was vastly pleased, but even he thought that she was just a little imprudent.

'Well, tell Miss Vernon I called. Perhaps, after all,

it is all right, and she is even now waiting for me in Park Lane,' continued Lady Goodhaven, again addressing her father's butler. 'Home,' she added in a louder tone, rather sharply, to the footman, who was in the act of closing the carriage door. He sprang hastily upon the box, and the horses pranced onwards, stepping up to their noses in a dashing, ostentatious manner.

'Most provoking! Just like Dolly!' exclaimed Lady Goodhaven, as she settled herself, with an impatient little twist, further back against the cushions of her carriage, and drew her skirts out of the proximity of her companion, in a far from quiet or courteous manner.

'What is the matter?' he inquired quietly, in a low, sympathetic tone of voice.

'Matter enough! What am I to do if she does not turn up, I should like to know? Do not gaze at me like that. I have a temper, as everybody knows,' and then, suddenly changing her tone, Lady Goodhaven smiled quite prettily, and told him the nature of the annoyance which had so upset her.

'Clinton was the other?'

'Yes,' returned her ladyship. 'Well, if she does not turn up, there is Hubert.'

'Goodhaven?' repeated Lord Edward blankly.

'Why, of course; he said he was coming home to luncheon to-day. I know nothing about his plans, but he is sure to give them up for me. How lucky. I do detest having any of my arrangements altered.'

All this was said in the most innocently jubilant tone imaginable. Florence Goodhaven, who was annoyed and upset herself, took a cruel delight in tormenting the man who sat beside her, and succeeded in doing so very thoroughly.

'Hubert' formed the key-note of the conversation with which she regaled her admirer's ears during their half-hour's *tête-à-tête* in that large, cool, fantastically-decorated drawing-room of hers, with its large, long windows overlooking the park. And long before Sir Richard Clinton or Hubert himself put in an appearance, Lady Goodhaven's luckless admirer had arrived at the astonishing and distressing conclusion that that popular, fashionable

beauty was, as far as it in her nature lay, in love with her own husband.

Very beautiful did Florence Goodhaven look, as she sat far back amongst the cushions of that large sofa, near one of the windows in her drawing-room, that summer's day. Her dress—a wonderfully arranged mixture of golden-tinted Indian silk and rare old Brussels lace—harmonised with the many-coloured Eastern embroidered sofa-cushions upon which she rested, in a truly artistic manner; the diamond brooch which nestled amongst the soft lace against that pure, ivory-tinted neck of hers, and the two large diamonds in her small, beautifully-formed ears, glistened and sparkled with every movement of her shapely little head, and seemed to lend an almost unnatural radiancy to her large, dark, heavily-fringed eyes. Her hair, drawn up to a grotesque height at the extreme back of her head, in the very latest fashion, chanced to suit her style of beauty to perfection; and the smiles which she bestowed upon the unfortunate Lord Edward were worthy of a better cause than that to which they were disposed—namely, the keeping of the devotion of a slave, whom their honour was wilfully goading almost past endurance.

Lady Goodhaven's drawing-room was little different from other nineteenth-century drawing-rooms. High palm trees, coppery phoolkaris, ivory paint, boldly-mingled artistic tints, reed curtains, here and there a marvellous kakimona, more grotesque than beautiful, but still in keeping with the rest; all unoriginal and fashionable, and to be found in the next house, and the next to that, and the next to that again; but in her disposal of these ordinary decorations, Lady Goodhaven displayed a singular and wonderful originality, and her drawing-room was said to be one of the prettiest and quite the most curious in town.

One of the most beautiful women in society that year, Lady Goodhaven was still very far from being as good-looking as her sister. Her face, chiefly remarkable for the fine eyes in it, and its ever-changing expression, was by no means guileless of the aid of art, and her really splendid figure lacked the natural easy grace which characterised every movement of Dolly Vernon's.

So let us leave her to her many admirers, and to her *tête-à-tête* with her especial admirer of the passing hour, and return now to the Squire's house in Brook Street.

The Squire, like Lord Goodhaven, returned home at luncheon-time that day. He did not expect to find Dolly there; he knew that she had arranged to go to Park Lane, an arrangement sometimes unavoidable, but never courted or wholly approved of by the Squire.

Fashionable beauties were anomalies quite out of the honest M. F. H.'s line. He did not understand them, or their ways, or the society which courted them, but his comprehension on the subject went far enough to make him feel undesirous of seeing his youngest daughter mixed up amongst them more than was absolutely unavoidable.

Not one word had ever been breathed against the Countess of Goodhaven. Her flirtations were rather marked, and rather foolish, but so open and wholesale, that everyone agreed in proclaiming them to be extremely innocent and unobjectionable. Lord Goodhaven, owing to the immense fortune left by Frederick Areley to his wife for the next twelve years, was now one of the richest peers in England. He adored his wife; he was extravagant, liberal, and popular; he kept one of the smartest establishments and coaches in town, one of the best yachts at Cowes, and quite the most get-at-able and best stocked moor in Scotland; and that his wife, being beautiful, should be also extremely popular, and hold an exalted position amongst the rank and fashion of the day, went without saying.

In their quiet moments, which were few and far between, Lord and Lady Goodhaven used to wonder what would happen when 'Harry' came of age. They used to laugh it over, and say, 'then the deluge, but we shall be old, and it will not matter.' They were both still young enough to think twelve years a lifetime, and they gave little thought to the fact that at the end of them they would have to exist on two or three thousand a year, and that they would then hear the real opinion society held of Lady Goodhaven's mode of conducting herself.

But the Squire, being no longer so very young, looked on ahead, and saw it all beforehand, and he did not wish to see Dolly often in the society of the beautiful woman who was buying the good opinion of the fashionable world, or even upon very familiar terms with that fashionable world which could thus easily be bought.

He did not think highly of his eldest daughter, but his belief in, and opinion of, Dolly were unbounded. Far more pleasure did it give him to see her settling down in her saddle on Viking's back, at the tail of the Muddleton hounds, her cheeks rosy with exercise, and her eyes sparkling with excitement, than sitting on her brother-in-law's coach at Lord's, surrounded by a perfect crowd of desirable *partis*, and the acknowledged beauty of the season.

Radiant, natural and beautiful, Dolly Vernon could not fail to look anywhere, but, as the Squire rather pathetically put it, she seemed 'less herself,' and his Dolly, when leading a butterfly London life, than she did in the hunting field in the county where she had been born, and where she was surrounded by a circle of staunch, loyal-hearted friends, who knew her real worth, and honoured her for it rather than for her beauty, of which they were proud enough as things were, but which would not have influenced them greatly either one way or the other, had the possessor of it not been the straightforward, right-minded, sensible young woman she undeniably was, and had she not won their respect and their hearts by that same straightforwardness.

Oddly enough, Dolly and her father had never had, so far, even a slight difference of opinion, much less a quarrel. That their first dispute was dawning, and would take place before that evening, never entered the M. F. H.'s head as he sat down to his solitary luncheon in the dining-room of No. 10 Brook Street. It was not until Price brought in a letter for him, written by Dolly, that a suspicion of a possible dissension taking place between them crossed his mind.

For the first time in his life, Squire Vernon was distinctly annoyed by the course of conduct taken by his youngest daughter. For the first time that course of

conduct struck him as being neither sensible nor right-minded; that it had been perfectly straightforward he could not but grant, for Dolly had made no secret of her intentions, and she had written a very decided, open, and easily-to-be-understood letter to him upon the subject of them. This was her letter:—

'My dear Dads,—I received a letter from Jack Denham's wife this morning, telling me that she was in great trouble, and dying. I came straight here to her, of course. I fear that she really is dying. She is quite alone, and seems to have neither relations nor friends. I have sent for Dr Fairbrains. Do not expect me back until you see me, and please send a line to Florence to tell her I cannot possibly go to Hurlingham this afternoon. Perhaps you could spare an hour or so and come and see me about it all. If not, explain matters to the Hailsdeanes, and do not forget they dine at 8.15. Please let Lady Sybil know; she was to call for me to-night, remember. I think, if you do not mind very much, you had better look in at Eastborough House, and the Domertons.—Yours ever, Dolly.'

'7 Asham Street, South Kensington.'

'A confoundedly unpleasant business,' exclaimed the M. F. H. to himself, when he came to the end of this extremely matter-of-fact and business-like letter of his daughter's. 'A confoundedly awkward business!—"Do not expect me back until you see me!—Explain matters to the Hailesdeanes!—Look in at Eastborough House and the Domertons;"—and leave Dolly at No. 7 Asham Street, nursing that—' here the honest Squire used a fairly strong, and rather impolite, expression—'wife! A pretty kettle of fish indeed! It is all very fine, but this is going a little too far. Miss Dolly has had a clear course all her life, and now she has bolted off it, with the bit between her teeth.'

Here the Squire again took up Dolly's letter, and read it once again from the beginning to the end. For once in his life, the extremely concise terms in which Dolly worded her epistles were not pleasing to him.

'It won't do!' he continued to himself. 'I'll be d—d if it will! We shall have some words over it; Dolly is not the sort of girl to turn her head when once she has taken the lead. But it won't do; and there the matter ends. I shall certainly spare an hour or so, and bring her home.'

And before many minutes had gone over his head, the M. F. H. had left Brook Street for this purpose.

But before long Dolly's father was made painfully aware of the plain and distressing fact that women, like horses, when they once get out of hand, are bad to hold, and that, although you may be bold enough to pit yourself against a daughter who, for two-and-twenty years, has been your absolute master in all matters, big or small, you are fairly certain to come off second best in the contest.

When he arrived at No. 7 Asham Street, Colonel Vernon was shown into the drawing-room, and then, like his daughter, he was left to his own devices there for a considerable length of time. He was not by nature an impatient man; but that quarter of an hour which he spent alone in Mrs Denham's little drawing-room seemed quite the longest fifteen minutes he had ever spent. A troubled expression, which made his face look positively stern, rested upon it, as he stood at the window, starting at the sound of every door which opened or closed in the distance, and momentarily expecting his daughter to enter the room. An unpleasant duty lay before him, and the longing to tackle it and get it over was burning hotly within him.

At last the door opened. The Squire turned quickly round. He had felt certain it was Dolly, but it was not Dolly. It was Doctor Fairbrains who entered, closed the door, and, with a bow, stepped across the room to the window where the Squire stood.

Doctor Fairbrains was a tall, dark man, His face might have been almost handsome had not a set, sullen expression overclouded it. His dark, rather deeply-set eyes, peering out from under long rugged eyebrows, seemed as if they noted everything, and yet could not look you fully in the face. His mouth, by far his best feature, was, with the square, firm chin beneath it, ex-

pressive of a strong and determined character, and there was a latent power plainly indicated in the curve of those lips of his, which opened in speech only when absolutely obliged to do so, and were never seen by any chance to smile. His manner was abrupt and *gauche* to a high degree, and although you could not but have granted that he looked a clever man, it was certain that no one could have said that he was prepossessing, either in manners or appearance.

Doctor Fairbrains, however unprepossessing his manners and appearance might be, was, nevertheless, a very great man, and one of quite the most fashionable and sought-after doctors in town.

There had been a time when Doctor Fairbrains had contented himself with quite a small practice in an extremely unfashionable and out-of-the-way corner of the metropolis, and in those days he was very far from being a popular man. His manners, which the fashionable world called honest, characteristic, and straightforward, had been considered bearish, unmannerly, and insufferable by his less fashionable patients. Possibly his unfashionable patients had been right in their judgment; for, as we all know, one of the great advantages unfashionable people have, is the indulgence they permit themselves of giving their own real honest opinion; whereas their more fashionable neighbours dare not allow themselves to hold any individual opinions at all, and only venture to echo the sentiments which those who are yet a little higher up the social ladder than themselves have previously given forth as being their own.

Amongst his unfashionable patients, however, Doctor Fairbrains chanced to have, here and there, a few admirers; a few people who had the sense to know that, in your medical adviser, it is highly advisable to have a clever man who understands his profession thoroughly, and that whether his manners are good or bad is an extremely minor detail, which will neither relieve physical pain, abate a raging fever, nor weigh one way or the other when it comes to a case of life or death.

Amongst these sensible people was a certain lady of the name of Grubb.

Mary Jane Grubb had been for several years the fond and devoted, if not very talented, governess of the only child of a widowed millionaire; and when Miss Elaine Geraldine Dobson blossomed into a full-grown, rather good-looking young woman, she would not hear a single word said upon the subject of the possible departure of the faithful Grubb on a search for fresh fields and pastures new. So Mary Jane Grubb continued to reside in the millionaire's house, in a position quite indefinable, but pre-eminently comfortable.

She had a little suite of rooms of her very own, and she came and went at her own sweet will; she was well paid, and had absolutely nothing to do save listen to the confidences which the young, over-spoilt heiress poured into her by no means unwilling ears.

But this state of things, of course, did not go on very long. The upshot of those confidences was, that Miss Elaine Geraldine landed into her father's well-baited net the noble but impoverished Duke of Dilton, and, very shortly afterwards, there was an extremely smart wedding, and an affectionate leave-taking between the newly-made duchess and the homely Mary Jane.

Luckily for Miss Grubb, Mr Dobson was not a man who ever did things by halves; he wished to dispose of Miss Grubb as soon as possible after his daughter's marriage; he had a hazy idea that if he delayed in the matter, instead of his disposing of Miss Grubb, Miss Grubb might possibly dispose of him; he was highly elated by his daughter's matrimonial arrangements, and felt in a humour to do things handsomely all round; so he settled an extremely liberal annuity upon the fortunate Mary Jane, bought her a comfortable little house in the neighbourhood of Bayswater, gave orders that it was to be furnished immediately at his expense, and, in an incredibly short time after his daughter's wedding-day, deposited her and her luggage at the door of the house which was henceforth to be her own.

Her Grace of Dilton, in the years which followed, used occasionally to pay a visit to Miss Grubb in her new home; and it was on the occasion of one of these visits

that Doctor Fairbrains found himself, for the first time, the medical adviser of a really great lady.

The Duchess, who had been frightened into the idea that she suffered from a serious affection of the heart by several eminent practitioners, happened to have an attack of slight palpitation while visiting Miss Grubb; and Miss Grubb, with a promptitude which Dr Fairbrains ought to have thanked her for—but did not—sent hurriedly to request that gentleman's immediate attendance.

He obeyed that summons with the same promptitude with which it was given; but, when he arrived, he was as gruff and brusque as usual, and told her grace, in the very plainest language possible, that there was absolutely nothing whatever the matter with her heart; that the very slight palpitation which was troubling her was due to indigestion; and that there was not the slightest cause for alarm, or use in his prolonging his visit. He even went so far as to hint that his time was valuable, and that he considered that they had been rather unreasonable in calling him in to attend to an ailment of such an extremely insignificant nature.

'If ever there was a fool!' cried Miss Grubb to herself, with uplifted hands, as soon as both Dr Fairbrains and the Duchess had departed. 'If ever there was a fool!'

But Dr Fairbrains was not a fool—far from it. He had had his chance, and he had grasped it.

Her grace went home that day deeply impressed by two facts—the first of them being that she owed two very uncomfortable, anxious years to three fashionable physicians; and the second, that at last she had met a really honest, clever, straightforward man, who cared more for his profession than his pocket—cared not a rap for all the duchesses in England, and spoke his mind to poor and rich alike.

In this the Duchess of Dilton was mistaken. Dr Fairbrains knew on which side his bread was buttered as well as anybody. He had played boldly for a big stake, and he had won it. Luckily it had been a case of a clever man, and not a particularly clever woman. Still more luckily, he had been able to read her character a great deal better than she had been able to read his. He saw

that she was a highly nervous woman, and that she had a decided wish to live to a ripe old age. Had he made a mistake, had the Duchess chanced to like her complaint, and to wish to pose for an invalid, Doctor Fairbrains would probably have ended his days in obscurity, but he had not made a mistake, and he became a great m a

No! Doctor Fairbrains was certainly no fool. Whether he was quite as clever as he was supposed to be is another question, but it is certain he was no fool. He gained one-highly fashionable patient that day; and long before her grace's digestive organs worked in a wholly satisfactory manner, he had become better known in Mayfair than he had ever been, or ever would have been, in Bayswater.

And this was the man who advanced briskly to meet Squire Vernon, after bestowing a grave, mechanical bow in his direction.

'Mr Denham, I believe?' he remarked, in a voice so gruff that it quite startled the Squire.

'No! oh, no! Certainly not!' exclaimed the Squire indignantly.

'All the same—all the same!' returned the doctor. 'Relative, no doubt?'

'Dear me, no, sir,' retorted the Squire testily; 'nothing of the sort!'

'Indeed,' murmured Dr Fairbrains, in a voice which plainly implied that the question under discussion in no way concerned or interested him, and that the sooner they came to a clear understanding the better. 'The young lady upstairs, who is nursing Mrs Denham, asked me to explain the case to the gentleman in the drawing-room.'

'Oh, exactly,' returned the Squire. 'I understand. The young lady is my daughter, and I am Colonel Vernon.'

Doctor Fairbrains bowed. His bow plainly expressed to the Squire that his time was valuable.

'Mrs Denham is very ill?' suggested the Squire.

'Dying! A case of hours,' returned the doctor.

'Dear me—dear me,' muttered the Squire; 'very sorry to hear it, I am sure! Very sorry, indeed.'

'Quite useless for me to remain,' said the doctor briskly.

'And my daughter, sir?'

'Your daughter, sir?'

'Yes. There can be no possible use in her remaining, either; can there, now?'

'I really cannot say,' returned the doctor, in an undisguisedly impatient tone of voice.

'She knows no more about nursing than you do!' exclaimed the Squire protestingly. 'No, no. I didn't mean to say that, you know. I mean—'

'Exactly,' cut in Doctor Fairbrains drily. 'Who is Mrs Denham's medical adviser?'

'I have no idea.'

'He ought to have been here to meet me. Most unbusiness-like proceeding! But my time is valuable. Let me see, it is three o'clock now. I will meet him here at six o'clock this evening. Good-day, Colonel Vernon.

And, bowing stiffly, Doctor Fairbrains hurriedly took his departure, leaving the Squire by no means highly impressed in his favour, and in a far from happy state of mind. As to the doctor, he left the house under the firm impression that he had just had an interview with an escaped lunatic; and he even went so far as to feel surprised that this same lunatic should be the father of the extremely sensible and matter-of-fact young lady whom he had previously met in Mrs Denham's room.

Meanwhile, very soon after Doctor Fairbrains' departure, Dolly joined her father in the drawing-room.

The Squire turned to face her in a grave and reproving manner; in his opinion, she had acted in a very hasty and imprudent manner, and he fully intended to tell her so. But, somehow or other, when Dolly stood before him, and her large eyes, with a troubled, earnest expression in them, looked up straight into his—the words which he had meant to say died upon his lips, and it was Dolly who first broke the silence.

'Oh, Dads, you cannot know how sad it is. She is quite young, perfectly helpless, and must have been suffering dreadfully. She was utterly alone, and, seemingly, has no friends or relations. I knew you would come at

once, dear. It is dreadful; is it not? I am so thankful she sent to us. Are not you, dear?' continued Dolly quietly, after a pause. 'But of course you are. You are sure to think of many things that we can do for the poor thing that would never enter my head.'

Now, as will be seen, Dolly was taking an extremely awkward line; that she was doing so unconsciously did not make it the less so, and the Squire found himself in a very unpleasant position. To be taken for a far better man than you are is not, as a rule, disagreeable; but to feel obliged to inform the person who thus places you upon a pinnacle that you are by no means worthy to hold such an exalted position, is certainly very far from being agreeable.

The Squire, who had carefully instilled into his daughter's mind that of all the failings which were likely to beset her, selfishness was one of the very worst, now found himself greatly troubled by the fact that she had quite laid aside all thought of self, and evidently expected him to do so also.

'Denham?' he gasped at last, for lack of something else to say.

'Is abroad with his regiment, I am sorry to say,' replied Dolly sadly. 'Is it not dreadfully sad for her, poor woman?'

Jack Denham might be abroad, and Dolly might be right in taking it for granted that the Squire had a kind heart; but that he was far from pleased that she should have thus taken up her position in Jack Denham's house was certain.

'Has he been wired to?' inquired the Squire.

'No. He is in India, and she will not live many days, possibly not many hours. It would be quite useless, and she sees it, and does not wish it.' Then a long silence. 'I have sent Houghton for a few little things,' said Dolly at last. 'I shall keep her here. There does not seem to be anybody here who is of any use.'

'Dolly!' exclaimed the Squire, now fully roused to the fact that the ground beneath his feet was giving way, and that every minute as it passed saw the difficulties which surrounded him increasing,—'I cannot permit this! You must not ask me to permit it; and there is the beginning and end of the matter.'

His tone was rather stern, and his manner that of a man whose mind was made up irrevocably. Dolly glanced up at him in a surprised and startled manner.

'I do not understand you,' she replied, in a perplexed tone of voice, after a slight pause.

'You ought not to have come here.'

'Not when a dying woman, who was in great trouble, wrote, imploring me to do so?' asked Dolly, so quietly that, had it not been for a touch of pink which kept coming and going in her soft, rounded cheeks, the subject under discussion might have been thought not to interest her or trouble her at all.

'That unfortunate affair of a few years ago makes it impossible for you to remain in Captain Denham's house,' returned her father, in a tone as quiet as her own.

'Putting the humane part of the question aside, father,' returned Dolly, 'do you think it more improper that I should grant Mrs Denham's request that I would come and see her, than that I should refuse to do so, because—owing to an old love affair—I could not, with propriety, enter her husband's house?'

This was an awkward question, and one which the Squire did not feel disposed to answer at a moment's notice. He glanced curiously at her, and then said quietly,—

'Very well, Dolly, you did as you thought best, and came. We will get in a competent nurse, if Mrs Denham has not already got one, and, if you wish it, I will accompany you here to-morrow to inquire how she is.'

'Father,' said she, in an ominously quiet tone of voice, 'do you quite know what you are suggesting?'

'Certainly, Dolly.'

'You do not mean to say that you would wish me to leave a friendless, unhappy, dying woman with no one near her except a nurse?' said Dolly gravely; and then, in a troubled tone, she added, 'Dads, don't tell me that you wish it! I cannot, and will not, believe it possible!'

'My dear Dolly, you are putting things in a very unpleasant way,' returned her father gravely. 'How is it that Mrs Denham has no friends of her own?'

'How can I tell you that, Dads? To pause to consider

that question would be very much the same thing as to refuse to assist a starving man until you could ascertain why he did not happen to have as big an income as your own.'

'And what is it that you wish to do, Dolly?'

'There is only one thing I can do that I can see, and that is to stay where I am.'

'Dolly, this is really very tiresome of you! How can I permit you to remain? You know that I really cannot permit it,' protested the Squire, in a troubled voice.

'I know that I am honestly ashamed of you for the first time in my life,' returned Miss Vernon, with withering scorn. 'That you could suggest even that I should leave this poor woman is positively disgraceful of you. I am extremely sorry that you have behaved in such a manner,—more sorry than I can tell you,—and I hope that, when next we meet, I may find you in a better frame of mind.'

And with a quiet dignity and a flushing face, Miss Dolly, having said her say, turned away and proceeded to leave the room in high displeasure.

She had reached the door before the Squire, who had been utterly confounded by the turn affairs had now taken, could open his lips.

'Dolly!' he exclaimed, as she laid her hand upon the door-handle. 'Here, I say, Dolly, come back!'

'Well,' she returned, in a stern and very uncompromising manner, 'I am glad if you are sorry; but I have wasted too much time already, and you must leave all explanations until another day.'

'My dear Dolly,' remonstrated her father, in rather gasping accents.

'Very well, I must forgive you, I suppose,' was the dignified reply. 'Only it does hurt one when one finds that one's most treasured idol is composed of clay.'

Here followed a pause, during which the Squire gazed blankly into his daughter's face, once again feeling too dumbfounded to say a word. To have an uncomfortable assurance in your mind that you have been doing wrong, and at the same time to be scolded like a naughty child by your own daughter, is, as the Squire discovered, really

a remarkably unpleasant position in which to find yourself placed. Dolly's father began to wish himself comfortably out of it; a suspicion that it would be difficult to retire with dignity from the contest had forced itself upon him.

'My dear Dolly,' he protested mildly, when at last he found himself able to speak, 'pray remember whom you are addressing.'

'I am sorry to say that I am perfectly well aware of whom I am addressing,' returned his daughter austerely; 'I only wish—oh, I cannot tell you how much I wish—that you were not yourself.'

Something at that moment tickled the Squire's fancy. Whether it was the thought of how the tables had turned against himself, or the supreme dignity of his daughter's mien, who can say; but certain it is that, at that critical juncture of affairs, he laughed outright.

'Be off at once, you little spitfire!' he exclaimed good-naturedly; 'and mind and prove yourself a better nurse than you are proving yourself a daughter.'

'I am glad I have brought you to your reason, sir,' returned Dolly; 'not that I ever believed you to be so bad as you tried to make yourself out to be. You did not shake my faith in you, not really and truly, you know.'

And with that quietly given assurance ringing in his ears, the Squire found himself alone.

'Precious near it, though,' he muttered to himself, as he stumbled down the rather dark and very narrow stairs; 'precious near it, by Jove.'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

'TRUST ME, AND BELIEVE IN HIM AGAIN.

'Anthony did bid me trust you, but I do not greatly care to be deceived.'—SHAKESPEARE.

DOLLY had drawn back the curtains and put out the gas. Outside, a half-hearted sun was feebly struggling to hold its own against the dull grey mist of early dawn. Now

and then a gleam of light penetrated through the gloom; but the gloom, so far, was having much the most of its own way, and the gleams were not only few and far between, but quite depressing in their lack of strength, even when they came.

Inside Mrs Denham's room, however, a small bright fire was burning in the grate, setting at defiance the state of the atmosphere without, and lighting up the pale faces of the two women who alone occupied that room. Mrs Denham was speaking, and Dolly Vernon, with a slightly bent head, and a curious, set expression, not easy to understand, upon her face, was leaning forward so as to hear the low tones which fell slowly from the dying woman's lips.

'Yes, my father was the head gardener at Woolton Park, in Hertfordshire. We lived at the North Lodge. I had no brothers or sisters, and my mother died when I was only six years old; but my father never got any stranger in. We managed the cottage between us after my mother's death. Sir Thomas's daughters were very good to me always; they used to make quite a pet of me in my childhood. I was a pretty child, I believe; and they admired me. Then, when I was only sixteen, my father died, and they took me for under-ladies'-maid at the Hall. I was not quite seventeen when Miss Helen married. She took me away with her to live at a beautiful place in North Wales which belonged to my new master, Mr Behren. I lived very happily there for about two years. Mrs Behren was extremely kind to me; and, owing to her having known me ever since we were both children, she took far more notice of me than ladies usually take of their maids. The ladies who stayed at Tynryhl Hall—I mean my mistress's especial friends, the ladies who stayed the most often there—also used to take a great deal of notice of me, and would treat me in a friendly, pleasant manner. I was considered a superior young woman, and I still retained the good looks which had so often been admired and attracted attention to me in my childhood.

'Looking back, I think it is a mistake when young ladies take extravagant notice of their cottagers' children,

and then continue to treat them more as friends than as servants in after years. It, of course, does make them superior to other women in their own class, and at the same time unfits them for the lives which they will probably have to lead.

'It seems very ungrateful of me to say this, after all the kindness the Miss Wooltons and Mrs Behren showed me, but I am not ungrateful—far from it. Only, I know that the "superiority" which Mrs Behren's friend used to so greatly admire in me stood between me and my natural and proper associates, and altered the whole course of my life. I was never popular amongst my fellow-servants, although I tried to be pleasant to them. There was a reserve in my manner towards them, in spite of my endeavours; and I was said to keep myself aloof from them, and to look down upon them.

'Perhaps I did. I looked at things from the same point of view as my mistress, and their rough-and-ready jokes and loud laughter jarred upon my nerves unpleasantly.

'I was quite indignant when Joe Cox, the head gamekeeper at Tynryhl Hall, began to pay me marked attention. He was a good, honest, hard-working man, of a fine, strapping appearance, about thirty years of age, earning high wages, and having a first-class character.

'I avoided him, and made it very plain that I considered him beneath my notice; but Joe Cox happened to admire a pretty face and quiet, superior manners quite as much as the ladies at the Hall did, and he had made up his mind that he would win me for his wife, if untiring perseverance could win me.

'I was indignant and disgusted at the mere idea of his thinking it possible I could ever marry him! And why? Because he said "them" instead of "those," and "as" instead of "has," and he lacked those little niceties and refinements in manner and speech which belonged to a class infinitely above his own—or mine. My mind had learnt to run in a superior groove—I had begun to look upon things in very much the same way as a lady would have done, and, as a natural result, Joe Cox's attentions were extremely annoying to me.

'Then came a day when Mrs Behren spoke a good word or two on his account: it was Mr Behren who urged her to do it. She told me what a good fellow he was, and how suitable it would be, and how I could hardly expect to do better, and might do so very much worse.

'Miss Vernon, I cried myself to sleep that night, disgusted with my life, still more disgusted with my kind mistress, and realising for the first time that, in truth, I could never expect to marry anyone superior in any way to Joe Cox.

'In the morning I was quite resigned to my life as it was. It was quite simple to remain all my life Mrs Behren's maid, and I decided that I would do so. Recent events had shown me how impossible it was that I could ever marry; nor did I feel any wish to do so, or sorrow in the prospect of not doing so. I had never even fancied myself in love, nor had I seen any man who attracted me at all.

'It was not so very long after this that my husband first came to stay at Tynryhl Hall.

'A few days after his arrival there, Mrs Behren sent for me to go into the drawing-room. She wanted me to tack some work together for her to embroider, and she told me to do it then and there, without taking it away. Captain Denham was in the room, apparently reading a newspaper in a chair near a distant window. From behind that newspaper he watched me surreptitiously for several minutes. Although I never glanced in his direction, I could not but be conscious of the fact that he was doing so. I frowned a little over my work, as I stood by Mrs Behren's side, for Captain Denham's manner was at first displeasing to me. Then presently he got up, and addressed a few remarks about the arrangements for the day to Mrs Behren. From that he asked her some questions about her work, and then he asked me to explain something he could not quite understand about it, leaning over the work in my hand as he did so.

'I was obliged to look up at him as I replied, or Mrs Behren would have wondered at my want of manners. Our eyes met. Miss Vernon, you may have seen many better-looking men than my poor Jack, but I have never

seen anyone half so handsome. It was terribly wrong of me, but from that first moment when I saw him standing there beside me, with his handsome face, and his tall, soldierly figure, I loved him as I had never dreamt that it was in my nature to love anyone.'

Dolly's fingers pressed closely over Emily Denham's, and suddenly she raised them to her lips and kissed them. For a second their eyes met, and then Mrs Denham continued, speaking this time in a more easy and natural manner, though in a voice which was momentarily growing weaker.

'I need not prolong this part of a painful story, Miss Vernon. That was the beginning of it. I suppose he was no worse than most other men are; but he was certainly no better. And I? well, if I had loved him a little more than I did, I might have acted differently. Of course it was all my fault; and I suppose I was very wrong to ruin his life by marrying him. Poor Jack! no man ever had a kinder heart; and, you see, he married me, and he tried for a long time to make the best of it all. I lived here in London from the first, and, of course, we did not very often meet, because he was nearly always with his regiment; but for a time he tried to make the best of it. Our child died; that was a terrible grief to me. I could have been happy and contented if it had lived. Well, Miss Vernon, things after a time went badly with us. Poor Jack! What Joe Cox had been to me, I suppose I became to him. For about two years he tried to keep up a pretence of loving me, but all the time I felt that he did not really do so. What that knowledge was to me, Heaven only knows! my life was terribly dull, but had it not been for that knowledge I could have been almost happy. But, meanwhile, I had learnt to love him. I loved him so dearly that I bitterly repented that I had ruined his life for him; and when I realised that it would be a relief to him if we agreed to live our lives apart, I entered into that arrangement, talked quietly over the future, and said good-bye to the past. God alone knows how I suffered then! Jack never even suspected it!'

Again there was a silence, and again the girl who sat so silently beside her bent her head, and, raising her

thin, wasted fingers to her lips, kissed them sympathetically.

'Miss Vernon, you are crying. How wrong of me to harass your feelings like this. For a long time we did not meet again, and then—then, quite unexpectedly, he came back to me, and all was changed. From that day I became his acknowledged wife, and from that day until the day he sailed for India—and I was obliged to remain in England on account of little Dorothy—I was selfish enough to be as happy as any woman could be, and Jack was the very kindest and best of husbands.' Once again there was a pause. 'I owe four years—which have been so happy that they have compensated to me for all the rest—to some lady, Miss Vernon. Some good, kind woman, whom Jack had learnt to love, sent him back to me. He told me so. He did not tell me who that lady was, but—'

'But you know?' suggested Dolly, in a very low tone.

'I do not think it likely that two such good women should cross my path as the one who sent my husband back to me, and the one who has promised to take charge of my little Dolly,' was the quiet reply; 'besides, you are so very beautiful, Miss Vernon.'

'And you think he would be so much more likely to listen to the arguments of a beautiful woman?' suggested Dolly, in a very low voice.

'I do not think a plain woman would have gained any influence over him at all,' was the very quiet reply; and in the speaker's voice there was no touch of that bitterness which had rung in the low tones of the younger woman's. 'Now that I see how beautiful you are, I see how it was that Jack learnt to love you so much. For he did love you, Miss Vernon, and he still loves you as I do not think he has ever loved any other woman. Do not shrink away; surely his love can do you no harm. You cannot know how grateful I am to you, or how glad I was to have him back again. If he had not loved you, I do not think he would ever have crossed my path again, and I am quite certain he would never have acknowledged me as his wife. Oh, it was good of you to think of me. God bless you for a good, kind woman, Miss Vernon! God bless you!'

'Mrs Denham, you—you do not know that at that time I loved him.'

'You loved him?' murmured the dying woman in credulous tones. 'You loved him, and sent him back to me?'

'Yes, I sent him back; but I was wicked enough to love him,' repeated Dolly bitterly. 'I loved him ever so long after I knew—about you.'

'Oh, Miss Vernon, do not speak like that! How could you help loving him? Think how good you were to me! Do not look so strange! Oh, Miss Vernon, if only you knew how happy it makes me to think that I have someone with me who—loves my poor Jack.'

There were large tears in Dolly's eyes. How could she now, after this, explain to Jack's wife that she had ceased to love him long ago, and that she looked upon him as a weak, unprincipled man.

'And you made him suffer too, Miss Vernon. Do not think hardly of him! For four years he was the best and kindest of husbands; for four years he had to suffer little disagreeable, unpleasant, social difficulties. I knew it. He made light of it, but I knew it. I could see and understand. You cannot know how kind and good he was; you cannot know how warm-hearted and good my poor Jack is. He is easily influenced—by—by—us, you know, but at heart he is as good as gold.'

Silence followed, and reigned supreme. Dolly, with bent head and a pale, troubled face, neither moved nor made any sign of having heard.

'Will you—will you marry him when I am gone?' asked a low, intensely anxious voice, by-and-by.

'Would you wish it?' asked Dolly, in a curious, almost mechanical manner.

'More than anything—more than I can say,' was the earnest reply.

'Why?' inquired Dolly quietly.

'Because then I should be certain that both Jack and my child would be happy, and in good hands,' replied Emily Denham, still in the same anxious, pleading tone of voice. 'Miss Vernon, if you can, will you give me a hope that this may come to pass? It would make me

happy, so happy! I should know then that, in his future life, Jack would be so happy that all that I have made him suffer in the past would be compensated to him by you.'

'Mrs Denham,' replied Dolly gently, 'I am sure that you mean to honour me—I mean that you are honouring me in thinking me a far better woman than I am—but please say no more. What you suggest is quite impossible. I have sworn to take your child under my own care until—Jack returns, and can take charge of it himself, but I cannot marry your husband. As to the past, you say you spoilt his life for him, but, in my opinion he spoilt yours. We look at these matters in a different light, you see. Anything he may have suffered was through his fault, and he had nobody but himself to thank for it. But as to what you had to suffer, which was by far the most, that also was through him, and he was to blame very greatly for it.'

'Oh, Miss Vernon, you do not know!'

'Indeed, but I do know, Mrs Denham; at least I know this—that it is extremely wrong of a gentleman to make love to a girl such as you were unless he, from the first, has made up his mind he really wishes and intends to marry her, and, if he marries her, it is certainly his duty to make her as good and true a husband as some poorer man in a humbler position would have done, had he never crossed her path.

'But it is so hard for a gentleman,' suggested Jack's wife pleadingly.

Miss Vernon put the case so clearly, that she hardly liked to contradict her; and yet she did not look at the question in the same clear way herself; she felt extremely sorry for her husband, and quite disagreed with Miss Vernon's argument.

'I am far from saying it is not so. Only I do say that, from the very beginning, people ought to weigh their actions, and think of the consequences of them. Mrs Denham, you see how impossible it is for me to do as you wish.'

'I do not wish it,' was the quiet reply. 'I do not wish my Jack to marry any woman who does not love him,

however good and kind she may be. He would make any woman whom he loved, and who loved him, the best of husbands; but if his wife did not love him, he would be utterly miserable. I am sorry, more sorry than I can say, but I see it is hopeless. Poor Jack!'

'There is no good deceiving you; I do not love him now,' said Dolly quietly.

'No, you do not love him now, or you could not see his faults as clearly as you do, and overlook his many, many good points,' agreed Mrs Denham quietly. 'And, since you do not love him now, be very sure you never really did love him.'

'Indeed I did, though,' said Dolly, with a sigh.

'I cannot think it possible. Love is not like that, as some day you will know. When that day comes, may it bring you as much happiness as you deserve,' returned Jack's wife solemnly. 'You are the best friend I have ever had, Miss Vernon. Do not be angry with me for having so greatly presumed upon your kindness, I entreat you. It was my love for poor Jack that made me do it. I would not have asked it had I not known he would have made you happy, so forgive me.'

'Indeed, there is nothing to forgive,' replied Dolly gently, in a low, rather broken tone. 'Do not talk any more; you look quite flushed, and your voice is very weak. I am a shocking nurse.'

'To have forbidden me one of the last talks I shall have in this world would have been very cruel,' was the quiet answer. 'I will lie quite still and silent now for a short time, and then I should like little Dolly to come and sit beside me. She is so good and quiet, and I can sleep, while she is here, so happily.'

It was sleeping thus, with little Dolly sitting close beside her, that, just four days afterwards, she died.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SQUIRE IS TROUBLED.

'Let thy gold be cast in the furnace,
Thy red gold precious and bright;
Do not fear the hungry fire,
With its caverns of burning light;
For gold must be tried by fire,
As a heart is tried by pain!'

ADELAIDE A. PROCTER.

A NEATLY-DRESSED woman stepped out of a hansom which had just drawn up with a jerk in front of No. 10 Brook Street. Having rung the bell, she returned to the hansom.

'Shall I take Miss Dorothy, madam?' she inquired, in a pleasant voice.

'Thank you, Houghton, but she is asleep. I think I can carry her indoors without disturbing her,' replied Dolly; and, as she spoke, she proceeded slowly and quietly to get out of the cab, with the child held baby-fashion in her arms.

'Is the Squire in, Price?' she inquired in a very low tone, as she passed him in the hall.

'No, Miss,' he replied, suiting his tone to hers. And then, as she quickly disappeared up the stairs, he paid the cab fare, and bestowed a low but severe word or two of disapprobation upon his subordinates, who looked unfeignedly surprised at the manner of their young mistress's return, and, as soon as her back was turned, and she was safely out of hearing, forgot themselves so far as to comment on it in a whisper to each other.

Houghton, meanwhile, had run upstairs another way, and reached her mistress's door in time to open it for her.

Dolly entered the room, deftly unfastened the child's bonnet and coat, and then, leaning over her own bed, laid her quietly and gently upon it.

'A shawl, Houghton,' she whispered, as soon as she had succeeded in drawing her arm from under her little charge.

Houghton silently left the room, and in a few minutes returned with a light, soft shawl, which she arranged carefully over little Dorothy's sleeping figure.

'Poor little mite. How pretty she looks!' said Dolly softly, with a sigh; and then she let Houghton dispose of her out-door attire, very much as if nothing unusual or at all agitating had happened.

'Can I do anything more, madam?' inquired that good woman, in a low voice, when this was done.

'No, thanks. Only please tell Elliotson I wish to see her.'

'Here, madam?'

'Yes, here.'

Five minutes later there was a gentle tap at Miss Vernon's door.

'Come in,' said Dolly, in a subdued voice; and a portly, rather stately, middle-aged woman entered the room, and closed the door.

There was a comfortable, homely look about Mary Elliotson, in spite of her slightly dignified carriage, and the thick, rich black silk dress in which she was attired. A superior-looking woman without question, but one who, in her superiority, had lost none of the womanly, homely appearance which so characterises a certain class of our cottage women.

'I want to have a little talk with you, Elliotson,' began her young mistress at once. 'I want your advice and help.'

'Both of which are at your service, madam,' replied Mrs Elliotson, with the genial, rather privileged manner and tone of a very old servant.

'I have been for the last few days with Mrs Denham; you remember Captain Denham, Elliotson?'

'Certainly, madam. A pleasant spoken, free-handed gentleman. I had need to remember him, Miss Vera, seeing the many years he came regular for weeks together to Wyndeane.'

'Of course,' agreed Dolly. 'This lady was his wife, and she died this morning. She has left her only child in my charge until Captain Denham comes home from abroad.'

Dolly stated all this in an almost suspiciously concise and matter-of-fact manner. She had no wish to dwell upon the fact that the position in which she now found

herself was rather an awkward one; but, nevertheless, she had already begun to realise that it had its awkward side.

'The poor little innocent!' exclaimed Elliotson, approaching the bed as she spoke. 'The poor little thing!'

And then together the two women, the old housekeeper and the Squire's young daughter, stood looking silently at the little sleeping form. The same motherly, sympathetic feeling was awake within them both. To the heart's core they were both thorough women, in the truest sense of the word; and the sight of the pretty, motherless little child touched them deeply, and stirred, as nothing else could have done, their warm compassion, and a touch of their best love.

Very pretty and very lovable did the little flushed face look, as it lay half-buried there on Dolly's soft white pillow. One little rounded arm was flung above the curly-haired head; and in that utterly graceful fashion of early childhood, the pretty little hand clutched in its fingers the soft gofered frill which edged the pillow-case. The light, white shawl, which Houghton had arranged over the little figure, had by a movement been partly thrown aside, leaving exposed to view two tiny, shapely little feet, nestling on the pale-blue silk eider-down on which they lay.

'You will help me to take care of her, Elliotson? You see I know nothing about children; and if she should be ill, or anything—' began Dolly gently.

'Indeed, I will, madam! Bless her little heart!' returned Elliotson warmly. 'And glad I shall be to have her in the house. I am very fond of children, and I have hardly seen a child since you were one yourself.'

'What a kind, good soul you are!' said Dolly warmly. 'And now, Elliotson, come here, I want to talk to you.'

As she spoke, Dolly laid her hand on the woman's arm, and gently, but rather hurridly, drew her away from the proximity of the sleeping child. Mrs Elliotson smiled. She was honestly devoted to her master's young daughter, and she had been distressed on coming into the room to notice how pale and anxious she looked. But this impulsive, almost childish, action was just like Miss Dolly's

own bright self; and, for the moment, at any rate, she seemed to have put her trouble and anxiety aside.

'Now tell me, Elliotson,' she continued, in her usual decided, must-get-what-I-want-at-once sort of tone, 'how am I to get a nice nurse, quite quickly? The woman who had charge of her is a horrid, sharp-tempered, uncouth person; so I will not have her here. Poor Mrs Denham told me not to keep her any longer than I could help.'

For a few seconds, the housekeeper did not answer; it was evident that she was turning the matter over in her mind.'

'I believe James Dalton's daughter is at home, out of place,' she suggested at last, in a questioning manner. 'Mary, the one who has been living for the last three years with Mrs Condover at Somerby Grange as nursery-maid.'

'The very thing, Elliotson. A nice, bright, pleasant-mannered girl. I know Mrs Condover liked her,' replied Miss Vernon, in a relieved tone of voice, as if one difficulty was satisfactorily overcome. 'I will write by to-night's post.'

'And, meanwhile, you will allow me to act as the little lady's nurse, madam?' returned the housekeeper persuasively, and as if it would really be a pleasure to her to do so.

'That I certainly will, Elliotson! Thank you very much,' replied Dolly promptly.

And so things were so far satisfactorily settled; and Dolly presently found herself alone.

The last five days had been a strange experience to her; and at the end of them she seemed to be rather altered, so much older, somehow, than she had been before. Five long days spent in the society of a dying woman; days spent in earnest, and often heart-rending conversation, save during those solitary hours during which Mrs Denham slept, and the young watcher by her bedside became wrapt in a dream of far from happy reflection.

The woman who lay sleeping there, so near her, was, as far as she could see, an unusually good, unselfish, high-minded young woman. That she had led a most pathetically unhappy life ever since Jack Denham had

crossed her path, and that she had made very light of her troubles, and the very best of very bad circumstances, there could be no denying. What made the case so much harder, and much more touching, was the fact that poor Emily Denham was one of those people who feel things acutely, and who are totally unfitted by nature for a hard or unhappy life. The manner in which she had idolised her unfortunate and erring husband all through, from first to last; the way in which she, through it all, still looked upon him as a perfect and most superior being, touched Dolly to the heart. She herself was cast upon a totally different mould; had she been in the other woman's place, she might possibly still have loved her husband, but long ago she would have granted to herself that her idol was made of clay, and that, in loving him, she was doing him a wondrous favour.

This woman, who had been reared in a cottage, and passed her early days as a lady's-maid, had a far nobler and finer nature than her own; and Dolly Vernon, who was a broad-minded young woman, had acknowledged that fact to herself, and felt a little ashamed in consequence.

But Jack Denham was not her husband, thank Heaven! Thank Heaven she was free to judge him at his proper worth. Thank Heaven, indeed, that she had been saved from marrying such a man as this.

So she had kept saying to herself as she sat by Mrs Denham's side. She admired Emily Denham's way of treating her unfortunate marriage, almost unduly forgetting that she had married a gentleman, and, in so doing, socially ruined his prospects, and placed both herself and him in a false position. In her sympathetic way, Dolly gave her whole heart to the wife's cause, and utterly condemned and despised the husband.

And, with a strong condemnation of a strong nature, how she did despise him just then! And yet, as a matter of fact, she had had a stronger case against him four years ago, and had let him go scot-free. In the one case, the man had behaved better than many of his fellow-men would have done; in the other, he had acted infinitely worse.

And now, standing near the open window in her bedroom in Brook Street, with Emily Denham's child sleeping peacefully on her bed, quite unconscious of its recent and terrible loss, Dolly went over the events of the last five days retrospectively. She knew that she had been a great comfort to Emily Denham. She knew that those last five days had been rendered as peaceful and happy as was possible to the dying woman. She knew that she had been more than satisfied to leave her child in her charge. She had received many last messages to Jack, and she had promised to watch over little Dolly.

Dolly had been almost surprised to find that, save in so far as anxiety for those she left behind went, Emily Denham had been thoroughly prepared and contented in the thought that her end was so very near. She was very young, so very young to die.

Some very serious conversations had passed between them, as was but natural; and the younger woman had been much impressed by the fact that where she had expected to have to lead, she had, as a matter of fact, been led.

The Squire need not have feared to trust his daughter to pass a few days in the company of Jack Denham's wife; for, well brought up and highly-principled as Dolly was, there were, nevertheless, several things which it was to her advantage to learn, and which Emily Denham, on her death-bed, taught her.

If Emily Denham's spirit was hovering overhead in her child's vicinity, the manner in which that child was being guarded and loved must have been a source of infinite happiness to her; but, on reading the thoughts of the girl who was thus guarding that child, she would have been dismayed to find the way in which they were dealing with the child's father.

Dolly alone knew how deeply she despised herself for having given her heart's best love to such a man as this. Dolly alone knew how fully she now realised that she had displayed a terrible lack of taste.

Could her father have read her inmost thoughts just then, he would have been almost glad that she had spent the last few days in Captain Denham's house; but, since he could not do so, he was very far from being so, and

was much relieved when Price informed him that Miss Vernon had returned an hour and a half ago.

Presently Houghton rapped softly at her door, and informed her that the Squire wished to see her.

Dolly instantly ran downstairs, leaving Houghton with the still sleeping child.

The Squire tried to look very grave when his daughter entered the drawing-room and hurried forward to kiss him; but, in truth, he was so glad to have her back again that he only succeeded indifferently.

'I have just come from Asham Street, Dolly. I must have missed you by a few minutes. I went straight there as soon as I got your note.'

'Yes,' she returned, quietly; 'she died about nine o'clock this morning, in her sleep.'

'Poor soul,' said the Squire gravely. 'And you, my darling—how have you stood it all?'

Dolly did not answer; instead of doing so, her eyes met his.

'The child, Dads,' she said presently. 'I brought it straight back with me.'

'The child?' repeated the Squire. 'Is there a child?'

'Did I not tell you so? Did you not know?'

'I had no suspicion of it!'

'And yet, why so much surprise, dear? There might likely enough have been half-a-dozen.'

'True,' returned her father quietly. 'Well, and who is to take charge of it? Of course, all directions are left about it. Aunts or grandmother, on its mother's side, I suppose?'

'No, dear,' replied the girl very gravely; 'it has no aunts and no grandmother on either side. Poor Mrs Denham was an only child and an orphan when he married her; and since then she has never communicated with any of her relations. As to his, they have never acknowledged her, or had anything to do with her. His mother died years ago; and he has no sisters, you know; and as to any more distant relations, I suppose they found it convenient to ignore her.'

'Ah!' said the Squire thoughtfully. 'Well, and what about the child? Under whose charge is it left?'

'Mine,' was the quiet answer.

'Yours, Dolly?' gasped the Squire. 'What do you mean, child?'

'I mean that I promised her that I would take care of it until its father could relieve me of the charge of it.'

'You promised to take care of it?' repeated her father. 'My dear girl, pray consider what you are saying! Pray do not say this to me so thoughtlessly!'

'My dear Dads, I am in solemn, sober earnest. What else could I do, dear?' she replied simply.

Dolly Vernon was so sure that she had taken the only and the right course in this matter, that her father's manner of treating it honestly surprised and perplexed her; and, as she waited for his answer, she glanced up at him in a puzzled, questioning way.

'What else could you do?' he repeated again. 'My dear Dolly, anything—anything in the world—except this!'

'You do not understand,' she returned quietly, in an explanatory manner. 'She was very unhappy and miserable about its future; she knew no one she could leave it with; she took a fancy to me—thought I would be kind to it, and was contented and happy in the thought that she left it in my charge.'

'But, my dear girl—'

'I know nothing about children, it is true,' she continued quietly, 'but I shall soon find out; and I shall certainly be kind to it. You do not doubt that, Dads, even if you doubt my capability in other ways?'

'My dear Dolly, I doubt nothing, as far as that goes, of course,' returned her father, almost pettishly. 'Pray do not be so childish! Cannot you see that the thing cannot be—that it is preposterously impossible?'

'Impossible, Dads?' she repeated slowly. 'Why, what do you mean? What would you have wished me to do?'

'Certainly not this!' was the emphatic reply.

'But I have promised,' said the girl firmly.

'Wrongly. You were very ill-judged to do so!' returned her father, more sternly than he had ever spoken to her before.

'I am very sorry you think so,' she replied gravely. 'It seemed to me to be the right and only thing to do.'

'Well, we must make some suitable arrangement about it, that is all,' he returned, in a would-be lighter tone. 'Of course, I see you found yourself in a difficult position.'

'It did not seem so to me,' she objected quietly. 'Wrong is wrong, and right is right; and it did not seem to me that I had any right to do wrong because once, long ago, some one else had done so.'

'We look at the question in a different light, Dolly,' he objected gravely. 'Captain Denham acted in a quite unpardonable manner—in a manner I can never forget or forgive—no man would!'

'We are not talking about Captain Denham, dear, but about his child,' she protested gently.

'But, my dear child, it is one and the same thing! How can I receive this man's child into my house? How can I allow you to take charge of it?'

'What harm will it do either of us?' she returned gravely.

'Well, as far as that goes, I think, socially, it may cause unpleasant remarks to be made,' he returned firmly.

'As far as I go, I care not at all for the society of those who would make any remarks whatever of a gossipy order about my conduct,' replied the girl proudly, with a look in her eyes, as they met her father's, which some of Dolly's friends knew and understood very well; 'and I should have thought that you had risen a little above such a very petty consideration.'

'We can none of us rise above it, Dolly, save in our own imaginations!' he returned quietly. 'But as to that, after all, luckily there never was a hint of this business wafted abroad, and there would be nothing strange in our taking charge of our old friend's child.'

'Nothing, Dads,' she replied simply.

'Perhaps not,' he agreed meditatively. 'But you see he is not my friend; he is the last man in the world I would call my friend.'

'But that is not to the point, dear,' she objected.

'I beg your pardon,' he returned drily. 'It is very much to the point.'

'Dads,' she pleaded gently. 'There was, of course, a

very unpleasant affair four years ago, but I think you owe it to me to bury the whole matter—as I did. I do not ask you to forgive a man who acted as no gentleman, no honourable man, would have done; perhaps, since you are a man, you could not do so, but I do ask you, for my sake, to make no difficulties for me as far as the child and my promise to a woman who certainly harmed neither of us, and who is dead, goes.'

The Squire looked very grave, and made no answer.

'After all, whom did Captain Denham wrong the most, Dads—you or me?' she continued earnestly.

'A hard question, Dolly,' he replied quietly. 'I can hardly say.'

'My dear old Dads!' she returned, softly and lovingly, 'I know you love me; but do not refuse me this. Cannot we bury the past and let it lie? Cannot you see that the dead woman and her child have neither of them done us any harm? Cannot you understand how impossible it was for me to refuse to ease a dying woman's mind of a terrible anxiety? Cannot you see that it is impossible to break the promise given—to refuse a little personal inconvenience and annoyance for the sake of doing right?'

Again, for several seconds, the Squire did not answer.

'Do you not see it all, dear?' she continued gently, laying her hand on his arm as she spoke.

'Yes, Dolly,' he replied very gravely. 'Let us say no more about it, dear. I wish things had fallen out differently, but we must make the best of a bad business.'

'I do not mind saying that I too look upon it as an unfortunate affair, but, after all, perhaps it is better for us sometimes to be able to do a good action that costs us a little trouble in the doing,' she returned thoughtfully. 'At any rate, dear, that is the abstract of what one has been taught, and it will do us no harm to practise it.'

'Her ladyship's footman has brought this note, miss, and is waiting for an answer,' announced Price at her elbow at this moment, and so ended the discussion, but both the Squire and his daughter looked very grave for several days afterwards, and, although they neither of them referred to the subject again, it remained uppermost in their thoughts.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FRANCIS FAIRSMORE'S ADVICE.

'True she is, as she hath proved herself.'—SHAKESPEARE.

'I AM so glad you have come over here to-day; I wanted especially to see you.'

The speaker was Lady Francis Fairsmore, and the person addressed George Ventnor, who had just crossed the lawn, and taken her hand in his. In his other hand he held a hunting crop, at his heels were a couple of smart-looking little fox-terriers, and he wore a light-coloured shooting-jacket, breeches and gaiters, and looked his best.

The Vernons had been in London for the last two months, but Fanny Fairsmore had spent all that spring at Fairscroft. George also, as it happened, had remained most of the time quietly at the castle, and, somehow, had found his way over to Fairscroft pretty frequently.

Few people could have known Lady Francis without liking her; and George, who had known and liked her for years, had discovered recently that she was an exceptionally charming woman.

It struck him then, as he stood there in the summer sunshine looking down at her, that she had never looked better in her life than she was looking in her simply-made, soft dove-grey dress, and huge, shady sun hat. He was, as a rule, wholly unconscious of what clothes people had on, and, as long as they looked trim and neat, thought no more about it; but still, it struck him that Francis Fairsmore looked uncommonly nice in that soft grey dress and garden hat.

'That is very nice sort of stuff your dress is made of,' he said, after he had made a few remarks in explanation of his visit,—which, by-the-bye, were rather hazy; 'why do not you ladies always wear those pretty soft things, instead of rigging yourselves out in hideous clothes, stiff and ungraceful looking in the extreme?'

'Is that a hit at tailor-made clothes?' she returned, with a smile and a faint blush.

'Oh, that is it, is it? Now, why do ladies have tailor-

made clothes?' he returned meditatively; 'they look nearly as bad in them as we should do if we had our things made by a dressmaker; do they not?'

'Oh, I do not know,' she objected laughingly; 'it is a fashion, and I do not think it is a bad one.'

'Not bad, perhaps, but ungraceful,' he returned persistently. 'Think how much more becomingly our great-grandmothers used to attire themselves.'

'Perhaps they did,' she assented absently; 'but never mind, do not let us talk about clothes, they bore me at all times, and just now I want to talk seriously to you.'

'Snub number one, my lord,' murmured George, *sotto voce.*

'Oh, no; certainly not,' she protested with a smile, 'you do not deserve a snub on that subject.'

She was sitting on a garden bench under the shade of the house by them; as she spoke, she drew off one of her gauntlet garden gloves, and her white fingers began to stray amongst some dead rose-leaves which half filled a little basket she had been carrying when they met, and which she had placed on the seat beside her. She wished to talk seriously to him, but, although she had much to say, she felt rather nervous about beginning. So, for a few minutes after that smiling assurance, she played absently with the rose-leaves, and remained silent.

George's eyes, meanwhile, became fixed upon those white fingers of hers, as they moved two and fro; and from them to the sparkling diamond half-hoop ring on one of them, and the plain gold badge of matrimony just below it.

George also remained silent. He was speculating on the possibility of her marrying again, and on the life she must have led with the late Mr Charles Fairsmore. Not that George was in any way mixing himself up in his speculations, or even feeling averse to the idea of her marrying some other man; he was not all in love with her, or, at any rate, was supremely unconscious of being so; only he felt a decided interest in her future well-being, and admiration for her past life.

'I heard from Dolly Vernon this morning,' said Lady Francis at last, after a long silence had prevailed.

'Yes, returned Lord Ventnor quickly. 'Did she say when they return?'

'Yes. Probably next week.'

'Next week!' repeated George in a surprised manner.

'Yes,' she returned quickly. 'It is about that that I wish to have a talk to you. Will you not sit down?'

As she spoke, she drew the basket with its withered rose-leaves nearer to her side, and so made way for him upon the seat beside her. George promptly complied with her request, and then, with quite a serious expression on his face, waited for her to begin.

Something was evidently troubling her; and that something was connected with Dolly Vernon, and therefore would probably trouble him, when he knew it, even more than it troubled her.

'Do you remember a Captain Denham who used to stay often at Wyndeane a few years ago?' inquired Lady Francis suddenly.

George started visibly, and, for a second, a flush of crimson passed over his face.

'Yes; certainly I do,' he replied quite quietly. 'He used to ride like the very—oh, I beg your pardon, Lady Francis; I mean he went uncommonly well to hounds,' he added hastily.

Lady Fanny smiled.

'So everyone used to say,' she returned. 'And I have heard so many people express that fact in the very way you were at first proceeding to do so, that you really need not apologise.'

Now, as it happened, in spite of this assurance, George still felt a little uncomfortable about the slip of the tongue which had passed his lips. Lady Francis, although the most good-natured and kind-hearted of women, was one of those people who have rather an awe-inspiring effect upon their friends, and in whose presence the generality of human-kind feel themselves bound to pay attention to their p's and q's. Whether those people are, or are not, a little 'tiresome' and 'tiring,' is not the question; George did not find Lady Francis Fairsmore either the one thing or the other, he merely felt that he had made a slight mistake, and, in doing so,

for the time being forgot all about Captain Denham. However, he was soon to be reminded of him.

'You knew that he was married?' continued Lady Fanny presently.

'Yes,' he replied, rather shortly. The subject was displeasing to him, and he wondered why she dwelt upon it.

'Well, his wife is dead,' she explained, rather nervously.

'Dead! is she?' repeated George, in a slow, meditative way.

'Yes. She is dead,' repeated Lady Fanny; and then followed a long pause. 'Do you remember asking me once, some time ago, whether I thought you had a chance with Dolly?' she asked by-and-by, in a low, rather hurried tone of voice.

'Yes,' he replied quietly. 'I remember.'

'Well, I want to advise you now for your own good,' she continued slowly, all agitation gone, and a dull, almost apathetic manner having taken its place. 'As soon as she returns, I should urge her to marry me, if I were you.'

'It would be worse than useless,' he returned, in a troubled manner.

'I do not agree with you,' she replied quietly. 'I believe that, if ever you could succeed, now is the time when you will be the most likely to do so.'

'I never could succeed, Lady Francis,' he returned sadly. 'I know that; have known it for some time past.'

'Have you ever wondered why?' she inquired, her fingers straying to the basket beside her again, and beginning to crumple up the rose leaves.

'No,' he replied quietly. 'I have never wondered why.'

'Did it ever strike you that if Captain Denham had been a free man, he might have been a dangerous rival?' she continued earnestly, not understanding his carefully-worded answer.

'If he had been a free man it might easily enough have struck me,' replied George. 'He is quite the best looking fellow I have ever seen, and just the sort of chap a woman would be sure to like.'

'Thank you,' she returned drily. 'You do us credit.'

'Indeed, Lady Francis, I see no reason why! The man

had singularly attractive manners, and plenty to say for himself on every subject under the sun,' protested George.

'I could not tolerate him,' she returned shortly.

'Poor chap,' said George, glancing at her with a smile. 'Now, that was awfully hard lines for him.'

'I mean it,' she returned gravely. 'I particularly disliked him. Perhaps one ought not to allow one's self to take strong dislikes; but I, for one, cannot help doing so sometimes.'

'Nor I,' granted George, with a sigh.

'Of course not,' she agreed quickly. 'And you like this "especially attractive man" no better than I do, if only you would confess it. Now, I tell you plainly, Dolly does not agree with us; he is a free man, and I think that, as a free man, he may prove dangerous.'

'And if so, Lady Francis, what then?' asked George quietly. 'What can I do?'

'Marry her before she sees him,' was the quiet answer. 'Of course I do not mean to insinuate that Dolly already cares for him. As a married man, that was out of the question,' she added quickly.

'Perfectly, of course,' agreed George gravely.

'Only I think she liked him better than she likes most people, and I think that if he had been free, there might have been more in it.'

'Possibly. A man who rides to hounds as he does is sure to stand high in her favour; she could not fail to admire that.'

'Exactly,' agreed Lady Fanny. 'That was the reason she consented to marry poor Captain Dasher.'

'Oh, I cannot agree with you there,' returned George warmly. 'Dasher was such an out-and-out good sort all round!'

'That might be said of other people,' she replied simply.

'You are very good to me,' he returned humbly. 'Well, and so you advise me to try my luck again?'

'Yes,' she replied, with a curious little catch in her voice. 'I do.'

She gave no reason for this advice; she would not have even hinted her reasons for it; she would not, could not, point out to him her belief that Dolly had, for the

time being, learned to despise the man she had once loved; but, nevertheless, she knew it for a fact, having read between the lines of Dolly's carefully-worded note, in a manner that young lady never for a moment had contemplated when she wrote it.

'It is very horrid of me talking like this about Dolly and a man whose wife is just dead, and who was married when she knew him,' she continued simply. 'I fear you must think very badly of me for doing so, Lord Ventnor, but I have a trick of looking on ahead into the future, and, for your own sake and hers, I thought it best to tell you what I saw there.'

'I know you have our interests at heart,' he returned warmly. 'You are a tremendously good little woman, Lady Fanny, we all know that, and no one better than I; and as to your being "horrid," if you only realised how perfectly impossible it would be to connect that adjective with your name, you would see how very nearly being laughable the suggestion of it is.'

'Thank you,' she returned, rather uneasily, with a little blush, which she tried in vain to suppress. 'Well, do you mean to take my advice?'

'Do you quite know what you have advised?' he returned gravely. 'You are advising me to urge a woman who does not love me to marry me, before she meets another man who, it is more than possible, she could love, and will love, when she sees him.'

Lady Fanny started uneasily, and the colour once again rushed hotly into her face.

'We neither of us like this man very much, Lady Francis, and we neither of us wish the girl we both love to marry him; but does it not strike you that, even if I am willing to sacrifice my own chance of future happiness, I should hardly be justified in sacrificing hers?'

'Oh, Lord Ventnor, indeed that never entered my head!' she exclaimed, with evident agitation.

'You see,' he continued gravely, 'it is natural that I should look on every side of the question when her happiness is in it. As to myself, I need hardly say that, in this matter, I should not consider myself at all.'

'Oh, but why not?' she protested, in a distressed manner. 'Indeed, you ought to do so! you must do so!'

'My happiness is wrapped up in hers,' he returned quietly, 'and we must consider how we can best secure it. As to her marrying me, I am not half good enough for her, and, when it was a question of Dasher, poor fellow, I was glad enough to stand aside;—but Denham! Lady Fanny, would Captain Denham make her a good husband?'

Lady Fanny made no reply. She could not speak just then. Full well she knew that, fond as she was of Dolly Vernon, it was not Dolly's welfare which lay nearest her heart; and the way in which George had put the case to her made her view it in quite a different light.

'I fancied the Squire had not hit it off so well latterly with him,' continued George quietly. 'But in that I may be mistaken, as his regiment has been abroad. Perhaps, after all, we are building sand castles, utterly wanting in foundation. Likely enough he may remain abroad another three or four years; and possibly, even when he returns, my idea is correct, and the Squire will not ask him here.'

'I do not see how that can be, seeing that at present he is taking charge of his child,' objected Lady Francis gravely.

'No! is he?' exclaimed George.

'Well, Dolly is,' returned her ladyship, 'which comes to the same thing.'

George was not quite so sure about this, and, in puzzled meditation, forgot to speak for several minutes. He knew far more about it all than Lady Francis did, and the present state of affairs struck him as being rather bewildering.

'She was with his wife during the last few days of her illness,' exclaimed Lady Francis; 'which, by the way, proves that, so far, we have very little to go upon in our surmises. The taking charge of this child, too, proves that, just at present, everything is as it should be.'

'Yes,' agreed George simply; 'if you had told me all this at first, I should have known there was no fear of her marrying Captain Denham.'

These two understood Dolly Vernon very perfectly; and George was honestly relieved of a great doubt when Lady Fanny revealed the true state of the case to him; but Lady Fanny, being a woman, looked on ahead, and saw wheels within wheels.

'There is Thomas!' she exclaimed presently, 'shall we go in? Tea is evidently ready.'

And so ended the discussion; but if, at the commencement of it, Lady Francis Fairsmore had been troubled in her mind, at the end of it she was assuredly not a whit the less so.

CHAPTER XL.

GEORGE IS TROUBLED.

'A lower range of feelings, and a narrower heart than mine!'
TENNYSON.

Now, in thinking that if George ever had a chance with Dolly Vernon, immediately after Mrs John Denham's death was the time when it was the most probable, Lady Francis had been quite right. She had always known from the first where Dolly's heart had been, although she had only had her own suspicions to go upon, and she had realised from the tone of Dolly's letters, written just after Mrs Denham's death, that something had happened which had made her view that gentleman from a disadvantageous point of view. That Dolly was given to feel very strongly either one way or the other upon all subjects, Lady Francis knew full well, and she therefore felt certain that if Captain Denham was out of favour, he was very much out of favour. There would be no middle course.

George, knowing for a certainty what Lady Francis only suspected, was very much puzzled by recent events; but he, on further consideration, held to his first opinion about it. He was not going to act in a hurried manner, and so involve himself and Dolly in a position they might both live to regret bitterly. He made up his mind resolutely to wait and see what would happen in the natural course of events.

And so the Vernons returned to Wyndeane, accompanied by Captain Denham's little daughter, and things in Mudshire went on very much as usual.

As to the child, in the first instance, the Squire accepted her as an unavoidable evil; any other child would have been more than welcome to pass the remainder of its life at Wyndeane; but, good man as the Squire was, it took him several months before he could forgive little Dorothy for being her father's child. But, as time went on, he became accustomed to her presence in the house, and, being naturally devoted to children, he began to like her pretty little ways, and to wish to have her with him.

As to everyone else at Wyndeane, from Mrs Elliotson down to the under-housemaids, they, one and all, agreed in thinking her a most attractive child; and Miss Dorothy soon became a very important little personage.

She was an attractive child, there was no denying that. And Dolly, as time went on, became really devoted to her; a devotion very thoroughly returned.

Then the hunting season began, and the Squire received a letter from the absent father, saying that he had now done as he had before stated he meant to do, viz., sold out of the army, and that he was on his way home, and would relieve the Squire of his charge before many weeks were over.

Several letters difficult to write, and still more difficult to answer, had already, as in duty bound, passed between the Squire and the man who used to be his chosen friend.

The Squire, from the first, had made up his mind that, under the circumstances forced upon him, he must let bygones be bygones, and ignore the past, but, nevertheless, that past was ever before him when he sat down to write to Jack Denham, and the result of it was a letter difficult in the extreme for Captain Denham to answer. But Captain Denham was so humble and so grateful in those answers, and felt his old friend's goodness so deeply, that by the time that last letter arrived, the Squire had begun to find their position towards each other less strained. As luck had it, no very unpleasant words had passed between them, and it was just as well for their future well-being that things were as they were, and that

nothing very much had been said between them on the subject of the past.

The Squire answered that letter in a far less formal manner than any which had preceded it, and assured Captain Denham that the child was in nobody's way at Wyndeane, and that he need be in no hurry about making a home for it elsewhere. For one thing, the Squire wished to postpone a meeting which he did not look forward to with joy, and for another, he really had no wish, by this time, to part with little Dorothy.

As to Dolly, she had settled down quietly into her old ways, but, somehow, she seemed suddenly to have grown much older than she used to be. People said that now that the hunting season had come round again, she was feeling poor Captain Dasher's loss keenly, and in this they were quite right—she was.

His death had caused a gap amongst their numbers which many another, as well as Dolly, felt acutely that winter, but none felt it so acutely as the girl he had loved.

There was not a man amongst them who could ride as he had done—not a friend she could turn to as she had always, since her childhood, turned to him. Hunting had absolutely lost half its pleasure for the M. F. H.'s Daughter, now that her old friend and fellow-sportsman had gone, and she was surprised to find how greatly his presence in the hunting field had helped to constitute its charm.

She had it pretty much her own way now; she was, in truth, what George had so often called her—the 'best man with the Muddleton.' When she chose, she could generally cut out the work for them now. She generally did choose to do so; oddly enough, not because it gave her the old infinite self-satisfaction which it used to give her, but because she knew that the dead man had thoroughly admired her riding, and that, had he been there, he would have liked dearly to see her doing it.

Dolly was uneasy in her mind—she knew not why, nor yet had she a suspicion of it; but often, strangely often, she wished that Captain Dasher had not died, and that she was now his wife.

Unconsciously, she was conscious that her future

destiny was closing in upon her, and, looking at it calmly from a distance, she knew it was not as she would have willed it to be had her life been guided by her head, instead of by her heart.

George, watching her closely,—as one watches those one loves,—came to the conclusion that, after all, it was not the living man who was his rival, but the dead one. Little things she said showed how deeply she felt Captain Dasher's death. To him, as her best friend, and the dead man's chosen friend, she alone mentioned Harry Dasher's name, but to him she made no secret of how greatly she missed him, and of how altered everything seemed, now that he was not amongst them.

George felt it also—almost, if not quite, as keenly as Dolly did, and the subject formed a fresh bond of sympathy between them, and drew them even nearer together in their friendship than before.

The two, both missing their favourite companion, now sought each other's society assiduously in the hunting field, and they jogged along from covert to covert generally side by side.

And so it was that, just when he was about to lose her, all Mudshire echoed Lady Fanny's prophecy—that now at last the sun was shining upon Lord Ventnor's love affair, and that, after all, Dolly Vernon was going to marry him. Even the Squire grew hopeful, and the only man amongst them who was not so was George himself. He knew full well that their new friendship was quite as unloverlike as their old one. He knew his case was, as it always had been, hopeless.

Meanwhile, as chance had it, an uncle of Captain Denham's died, leaving him, rather to his surprise, a house and property in Devonshire. As in duty bound, on arriving in England, he went down there to look at them.

He understood, from the Squire's last letter, that he was not wanted at Wyndeane, and that they expected him to leave his child there for the present; and, seeing that he had no idea as to what he should do with the little girl, he was more than willing to comply with the Squire's wishes. As to going to Wyndeane, he dreaded

doing so. He was under a tremendous debt of gratitude to the Squire and his daughter, both of whom he had deeply wronged, and he shrank from meeting them, as it was in his nature to shrink from anything unpleasant or personally trying.

And yet, he felt very strongly about it all—quite as strongly as many a far better and stronger man could have done—and, although he shrank from the meeting which sooner or later must take place, he was well aware he should never have a happy or comfortable moment until it was over.

On looking over his newly-gained possessions, he found little to interest him in them. A dull neighbourhood, a large house—greatly out of repair, and a large property attached to it. The property was well enough in its way; but Captain Denham knew nothing whatever about farming, and he cared even less. He spent several weeks in a rather forlorn manner in the vicinity of his estate, and had many consultations with his agent on matters which he could not, even hazily, comprehend; then he turned his back on Devonshire, and made his way up to town. There, for a short time, he managed to exist, and spent much time at Tattersall's; but, by the time he had mustered half-a-dozen hunters, he was glad enough to leave the metropolis.

Where to go? The Shires? Well, yes; it should be the Shires; but might he not have a couple of weeks in Mudshire to begin with? Could there be any objection to his stabling his horses in Muddleton, and hunting from 'The Clive'—a well-known inn in the vicinity of the kennels?

His child was there, at Wyndeane, and, sooner or later, he must go there; perhaps this would be the best way of breaking the ice.

And so Captain Denham wrote to the M. F. H., asking if this arrangement would be agreeable to him; and the Squire, with a sigh, replied that it would be so, at the same time proffering a three days' invitation to Wyndeane to begin with.

There had been a time when the Squire had vowed that this man should never cross his threshold again,

should never again even lay his hand in his; but now he knew that the matter had gone out of his keeping, and that he was bound, for his daughter's sake, to appear to be on friendly terms with him; and so, like a wise man, he accepted the inevitable (metaphorically speaking, took the bull by the horns), and asked him to his house.

Captain Denham's acceptance of that invitation came by return post, naming Thursday as the day for his arrival there. The Squire, in a fit of not unnatural petulance, hardly read the letter to the end ere he crumpled it up and chucked it in the fire.

Thursday the fifteenth, he told Dolly, was the day mentioned in it; whereas the eighth was the date given in that hastily-destroyed letter.

Thursday the eighth found Dolly, towards tea-time, sitting by the drawing-room fire, a piece of work lying idly on her knee, and her grey eyes fixed dreamily upon the little child, who was playing upon the hearthrug at her feet.

'See, Dorothy, dear, you cannot do it!' she exclaimed presently. 'Let Dolly help you.'

The childish face, which had clouded over at the downfall of the third brick castle which its owner had laboriously constructed, instantly grew bright again; and, in a second more, Dolly was sitting on the hearthrug, busily engaged in building a model house and garden in a truly scientific fashion.

A few minutes later the door opened, and George Ventnor stood upon the threshold. For a second he hesitated—a sharp, irrepressible pang of actual pain had stabbed him, for the moment, deep down in his honest, manly heart. Only for a second did he heed it, and then his face assumed its habitually jovial expression, and, having closed the door, he crossed the room, seated himself in Dolly's vacant chair, and took little Dorothy upon his knee.

The child was devoted to him; and, with that unerring instinct which is given alike to children and to animals, she had long since sounded the depths of George's loving heart, and taken him for her dearest, most confidential friend.

Dolly, her face flushed crimson by its proximity to the

blazing fire, continued to sit on the hearthrug, and watched them in a half-amused, half-absent way, with a smile upon her lips.

They made quite a pretty domestic-looking group, those three, as they sat there in the ruddy firelight. And it was this sight which greeted Captain Denham's eyes when he entered the Wyndeane drawing-room after five years' absence.

Before either George or Dolly quite realised what had happened, Price had announced 'Captain Denham,' and had closed the door upon him; thus, in a most discomposing manner, turning the trio into a quartette.

George, in his surprise, paused in his game of romps with little Dorothy, and absently held her posed mid-air upon his foot, on which she had been galloping at the moment her father entered the room.

As to Dolly, for a moment she did not move nor look in his direction; and then, with a quiet, self-possessed dignity, she rose from her lowly position on the hearthrug, and advanced to greet her unexpected guest, just as if nothing at all unusual had happened.

'You are just in time for tea,' she observed affably, as she laid her hand in his; and no one would have suspected for a moment, by her manner, that his arrival was a surprise to her; or that she had not seen him for five years, and had parted with him then under very trying and peculiar circumstances.

George Ventnor, knowing that at one time she had loved the man, believing him to be free, and that he must assuredly have behaved vilely to her to have brought things to this pass, could not help saying to himself, 'Well done,' although he hardly felt prepared to follow the quiet lead she had given him.

Just for a second or two he felt that he could not move a step, that he could not offer him his hand. George felt very strongly on the subject of Captain Denham's past conduct towards the woman he, George, not only loved dearly, but looked upon as almost a saint.

During that moment's hesitation on his part, Dolly turned and glanced at him; and she stepped aside with a quiet—

'You remember Captain Denham, of course, George?'

'Of course,' he agreed, quite heartily. 'How are you, Denham? Glad to see you in this part of the world again!' and, as he gave expression to this polite untruth, he shook hands quite cordially with Captain Denham.

Captain Denham murmured a rather indistinct reply. He was very far from being at his ease.

This became so apparent, that George also began to feel awkward and uncomfortable; and the consequence was, that Dolly had a very trying and difficult part to play. She did it very well; conversed in a genial, careless manner on everyday subjects, remembered smilingly that Captain Denham liked sugar—called him 'Jack,' as she used to do in bygone days, and at last succeeded in setting the two men fairly at their ease. But, well as she acted, she was feeling terribly nervous; and she, as well as Captain Denham, forgot the very existence of the latter's child, until reminded of it by George, upon whose knee it was sitting.

'This is your kid, Denham,' he said suddenly. 'We are all tremendously fond of her here, and I warn you we have been doing our best to spoil her. What do you say about it, Dorothy?'

'Say, you're naughty boy, George,' replied Miss Denham indignantly. 'Naughty boy; and I sha'n't love you, never again.'

But, in spite of this assurance, Captain Denham's child remained on George's knee; and refused resolutely to go to her father, until he bribed her to his side by means of a small parcel which he produced out of his coat-pocket for her. Once upon his knee, she seemed quite contented there; and George, glancing surreptitiously at them, relented a little in his opinion of the man, who, in spite of the awkwardness of his position, was being very nice in his manner towards his child.

'I think I must be going, Dolly,' he said presently. 'I promised to meet a man at the Hill farm at half-past five, and it will take me all my time to get there.'

And so, after shaking hands with Dolly, pressing her little fingers closely and nervously as he did so, bestowing a kiss upon his little friend Dorothy, and giving his

hand to Captain Denham, George turned his back upon them, and went his way. And there was no man in Mudshire with a sadder heart than the Earl of Ventnor, as he rode slowly across the park a quarter of an hour later on. An expression of pain and trouble overclouded his naturally jovial face, and anyone meeting him could not have failed to notice that something had gone seriously amiss.

'I really think I should not have minded it so much if it had been any other man,' he murmured to himself as he went along; 'but to lose her thus—and to that man!—Well, God grant he may make her happy!' he continued, as he rode through the lodge gates; and so deeply was he troubled, that, much to her astonishment, he forgot to say a single word to the old woman who stood smiling and curtseying behind it.

After dinner that evening, contrary to his custom, he went straight to the library, instead of joining his mother in the drawing-room. At about ten o'clock, Mrs Coningham followed him there.

That something had gone wrong she had fully realised by his manner at dinner time, but she was in no way prepared for the sight which met her eyes when she opened the door. He had not heard her, that was evident, for he was sitting by his writing-table, with his elbows resting on the table, and his face buried in his hands. That he was battling with some strong emotion was also evident,—painfully evident,—for his broad shoulders were shaking in a significant and ominous fashion. For just a moment Mrs Coningham hesitated, and then, like a wise, kind woman, she very quietly closed the door, and left him alone with his grief.

Two hours afterwards, Lord Ventnor was sleeping soundly; but there was no sleep for his mother that winter's night, and, for many days afterwards, she went very quietly about the house, with a grave, pre-occupied expression on her face.

CHAPTER XLI.

FIVE YEARS AGO.

'He little knows
A woman's heart, who, when cold wind blows,
Deems it will change. No !—storms may rise,
And grief may dim, and sorrow cloud her skies,
And hopeless hours, and sunless days come on,
And dark despair the gloomy future fill—
But, loving once, she loves through good and ill.'

SANDFORD EARLE.

Now, when George stated that he was obliged to go, Dolly had more than suspected he was not speaking the strict truth. She did not believe the story about the man at the Hill farm, and she felt sure that it was Captain Denham's presence which was driving him away. She would have given much to detain him, and the mere fact of his abrupt departure made her feel both awkward and uneasy. Difficult as it had been to keep things going smoothly, and not too stiffly, while he had been present, she felt it would be doubly so after he had gone; but she saw no reason for detaining him, and did not like to do so, her extreme nervousness making her painfully anxious to seem as if perfectly at her ease. She knew that the merest hint would keep him by her side, and yet she dare not give it; and so she let him go, and found herself alone with Captain Denham and his child. For several seconds after the door had closed she gazed resolutely into the fire, not feeling prepared to meet Captain Denham's eyes; then she looked up, and bestowed a pleasant smile upon him.

'How glad you must be to see her again,' she said softly.

Captain Denham, who had been steadily contemplating the top of his little daughter's dark-haired head, started visibly when thus addressed, and in his confusion the colour deepened on his sunburnt face, and spread itself over the white patch on the right-hand side of his forehead. Then, for the first time, from under their long black lashes, his dark blue eyes glanced up and met hers fully and unflinchingly.

'Yes,' he replied quietly, 'I am very glad to see her

again, poor little mite; although, as you see, she had quite forgotten me.'

'Children so soon forget,' she pleaded quickly, in a sympathetic manner.

'Yes, children soon forget,' he repeated slowly; and then there followed a long rather awkward pause.

Captain Denham drew Dorothy's childish little figure closely to his side, hardly conscious of how firmly he was holding it there; and the child, although not resisting this attention on her father's part, glanced up gravely into his face in a questioning manner.

'How you'se heart does beat,' she remonstrated at last. 'It's so funny.'

But it was not funny at all, it was extremely awkward; so awkward, indeed, that for several seconds neither Dolly nor Jack Denham found a word to say for themselves, and a rather terrible silence reigned supreme in the Wyndeane drawing-room. It was the woman who first regained her self-possession.

'Will you not come and sit on my knee, dear,' she said quietly; and a minute later her suggestion had been carried out; but there was to be no escape from that childish tongue.

'I want to see if you go pit, pit, pat, pat too, Dolly. Breathe hard—so,' drawing a long breath, 'and let me see.'

So saying, Miss Denham nestled herself closely to Dolly's side; and her father, in his confusion, began to doubt whether, after all, he was so very glad to see his little daughter again.

'Of course it does, dear,' returned Dolly gently. 'Do you not know that we could not live if our hearts did not go pit pat like that?'

'Yes, I know,' assented the child solemnly. 'But my papa's heart goes very funny.'

'Poor papa,' said Dolly; and then once again her glance strayed in his direction and met his.

'Miss Dorothy,' said a voice in the doorway, 'it is bed-time.'

Jack Denham heaved a deep sigh of relief; and Dorothy, having been kissed by Dolly, and then by 'my papa,' was borne off to bed.

If Dolly had found herself placed in a rather awkward position on George's departure, certainly after Dorothy's the awkwardness in it had not decreased; but luckily, in the face of great difficulties, she always grew very calm, and could show much presence of mind.

'Children never understand,' she said softly, as soon as they were alone. 'Poor little girl, how could she? Not that she has forgotten—only she does not connect things with you.'

This very diplomatic speech, and the manner of the woman who made it, had the effect of instantly calming Captain Denham's agitation, which, in truth, had been of a distressing and painful nature. He looked up at her, and, meeting the steady, sympathetic gaze of her grey eyes, gained complete self-possession.

'How very, very kind you and the Squire have been,' he returned gently, and with much real feeling; 'I can never thank you, never, that I know, but—'

'You must not try,' she interrupted quickly. You have nothing to thank us for. We are devoted to little Dorothy; and it was for her own sake—and her mother's—that we did the little we have done; and, indeed, we could not have done less.'

This gently-given, but rather pointed speech, might have made many men in Captain Denham's position feel a little snubbed and awkward, but Jack Denham, in spite of his faults, had a particularly nice disposition, and he accepted it quietly as his due.

'You could not have done more,' he returned earnestly, and then in a very grave way his eyes again met hers, and this time a question was plainly expressed in them.

For the next twenty minutes she talked quietly and seriously to him, her low, sweet voice repeating things poor Emily had said, and wished him to be told; and long before the Squire came in these two had forgotten to feel awkward, and in the solemnity of their conversation had lost sight of that past which seemed to have become so much further away, and longer ago, than it had been an hour before.

Jack Denham, indeed, under the influence of this quiet, self-possessed woman, almost forgot that she was the

Dolly he had loved so passionately and wronged so greatly five years ago, and, in consequence, when the Squire came in, he was able to meet him in a far more natural and less confused manner than he had in any way expected.

The Squire was very anxious to avoid any awkwardness in the situation which it was possible to avoid, and was both pleased and relieved at the way in which Jack Denham spoke and conducted himself. His manner was humble, and yet not too humble; subdued, and yet not too subdued; grateful, and yet not objectionably so; and altogether just as it was best it should be, seeing that he was the Squire's invited guest, and that, in giving the invitation, the Squire had naturally wished it to be understood that bygones were to be bygones, and must be buried in the past.

Then the three, now almost at their ease, hurried away to dress for dinner, having put off doing so until rather late.

During dinner time things went more pleasantly than might have been supposed possible. Dolly, although in a very quiet and grave humour, talked incessantly, starting a fresh subject the very moment there was a sign of flagging in the conversation, and entering into it with a zeal which was certainly highly commendable, and never failed to have its reward.

After dinner, when the gentlemen followed her to the drawing-room, which they did very early that evening, things did not go quite so well. Dolly seemed to have come to the end of her conversational powers, and the Squire and Captain Denham made desultory remarks at rather long intervals, and presently began to both look and feel bored and depressed. Suddenly a bright idea entered Captain Denham's head.

'Will you not sing? It would be such a treat if you would,' he remarked to Dolly

The Squire was sitting at one side of the fire, Captain Denham at the other, and Dolly between them. As he spoke, Jack Denham, for almost the first time since dinner, stole a long look at her.

Five or six years ago he—having no right to do so—had admired her immensely. That as a young girl she

had been extremely pretty there was no doubt, and Jack, who thoroughly appreciated good looks in a woman, had, as we know, allowed his admiration to carry him a great deal further than it ought to have done.

When he parted with her five years ago, wrong as his love for her had been, he had loved her as much as it was in his nature to love, and far more deeply than he had ever loved any other woman. For five years he had remained constant to his love for her, and during those five years had, naturally, been picturing her to himself just as she had been at seventeen.

And this woman, who sat there between the Squire and him, was not that same Dolly at all.

Pretty as she had been in her girlhood, there had been in it no promise of her ever being such a remarkably handsome woman as she was now. Her beauty, which had been made much of in society, struck him as being of an unusual and striking order. But she was not the same sweet, girlish, bewitching Dolly at all.

'Yes, Dolly, sing us a song; there's a good girl!' urged her father. 'You have not sung me a song for an age.'

'Very well,' agreed Dolly with a smile. 'What shall I sing?' And as she spoke, she rose and moved across the room towards the pianoforte.

'Anything you like, Dolly. You know best,' replied the Squire, settling himself comfortably back against the cushions of his chair, and slightly turning his head so as to be able to see her.

Dolly ran her fingers lightly over the keys, doubtful what she would sing to them. She knew her father's favourite songs well. Old melodies, with words of a highly sentimental and pathetic nature. Dolly did not feel in the humour to sing one of her father's old favourites to-night.

In a half-absent, half-questioning way she raised her eyes to Jack Denham's, as he leant against the wall close beside her, ready to turn over her music.

The Squire turned away, and fixed his eyes upon the fire; the picture those two made in that rather distant corner was not pleasing to him, undeniably effective as it was from an artistic point of view.

Jack Denham's handsome face and well-made figure; his short, smooth, glossy black hair, his perfectly-fitting clothes, his smart, trim, soldierly appearance, all annoyed the Squire. There was nothing in his appearance which told of his being the widowed husband of an ex-lady's-maid, and the *mauvis sujet* who had so wrongfully made love to the Squire's young daughter. No. Here was a smart, handsome man, looking no more than eight-and-twenty at the most, whereas he was nearer five-and-thirty; and a soldier, every inch of him, with a soldier's polished manners conspicuously to the fore.

'Will you sing a hunting song?' suggested this same good-looking gentleman. 'You used to sing them so very well.'

This was the first time Captain Denham had ventured to mention the past, and he coloured faintly, but unmistakably, as he did so.

'Oh, no,' she replied quickly. 'I cannot sing a hunting song.' And a shade passed over her face, leaving it overcast with a grave, sad expression of regret.

Captain Denham had, of course, heard of her engagement, and of Captain Dasher's death; but he had forgotten both these facts when he suggested that she should sing a hunting song. Now he suddenly remembered them, and, naturally, felt very uncomfortable in having committed a *bêtise*. Yes, uncomfortable certainly; but something else as well. What was the meaning of this sudden feeling of pain which had touched him in the heart? Why did he give that slight, involuntary start? Why did the colour rush up into his sunburnt face, and then die as suddenly away, leaving it pale in spite of tan and sunburn? Ah, why?

Because in that moment Jack Denham learnt that if the Squire's daughter was no longer the sweet, girlish Dolly of five years ago, she was still the one woman in the world who had it in her power to touch his heart to its very core by a word or look, and that, now that he was free to woo her, she was no longer to be won.

And, while he leant against the wall beside her there, she began to sing, and sang first one song and then another, and yet another still. At last she told the

Squire that he had no conscience; she could sing no more.

Half-an-hour later, she was just opening her bedroom door on her way to bed when her father came out of his room, which was nearly opposite hers. He was giving himself a final shake into his smoking-jacket.

'Good-night, my dear one,' he said, with unusual affection, as he stooped in passing to kiss her.

'Good-night,' she replied softly, returning his kiss. 'Good-night, my dear old Dads.'

'God bless you, my poor little girl,' murmured the Squire, in rather broken accents. 'It cannot be helped, Dolly, dear; it cannot be helped! And we will always stick together, come what may! Remember that, Dolly; you may always depend upon your old Dads,—come what may.'

And with this curious speech the Squire hurried on and left her. What he meant by it is not for me to say; but Dolly understood it, and entered her room with a very serious expression in her large grey eyes, and a curious quiver flickering round the corners of her pretty little mouth.

What Captain Denham had failed to realise, the Squire had divined. Dolly Vernon had a very practical, almost prematurely wise, little head, but, unfortunately, she had an unusually warm and loving heart as well; and, although she had viewed her old lover from a very disadvantageous point of view a short time ago, she had learnt that evening that, after five years' absence, she loved him still.

CHAPTER XLII.

I DO NOT LIKE TO SEE HIM THERE.

'While the merry chase went heedless sweeping by,
Am I womanly and weak
If the tear was on my cheek.'—WHYTE MELVILLE.

'READY?' exclaimed Dolly Vernon, in a slightly surprised tone of voice the following morning. She was kneeling on the hearthrug by the drawing-room fire, an

open letter in her left hand, and the poker in her right. She was attired in a remarkably neat and well-made habit, with a black-and-white checked waistcoat; but she had on neither hat nor gloves, and did not appear as if she was thinking of leaving the fireside for some time to come. Captain Denham, on the contrary, had just entered the room, with his hat in one hand, and his gloves and hunting crop in the other.

'Yes,' he replied. 'Is it not time we were off?'

'We need not start for another half-hour,' she replied. 'The hounds do not meet until half-past eleven to-day.

'Oh, that is it, is it,' replied Captain Denham. 'Then, of course, there is no hurry.'

'No; but do not put your things away!' she exclaimed quickly. 'I will be ready in a minute, and we will go and look at the horses.'

The truth of the matter was, that Dolly by no means wished for a half-hour's *tête-à-tête* with Captain Denham in the drawing-room, and she made this proposition solely to avoid it. She rose from her lowly position as she spoke.

For a second or two he forgot to answer her. The position in which he had found her reminded him almost painfully of bygone days. Really, in her habit, Dolly did not look so altered after all; and, just now, there was a tinge of rose in her cheeks, just as there used to be sometimes in the past, a faint, flickering blush, which was not in the least like any other woman's blush that he had ever seen.

'Thank you; that will be charming,' he replied presently, in a rather hurried manner; for her eyes had met his, and reminded him by the expression in them that she was waiting for an answer. She quickly turned away, and left the room.

She was glad to leave it. Glad, because in her heart she felt reluctant to do so. Glad, because she felt terribly nervous in his presence.

That he loved her she knew very well. Not that he had intended her to know it—far from it. He had been in far too humble and subdued a frame of mind for that. He had, in fact, done his utmost to conceal his feelings.

Only, as it happened, however hard Captain Denham might try to do this, it was only so much trouble thrown away; for, unconsciously, his eyes betrayed his heart at every glance.

This was really not his fault, but the fault of his eyes, and his eyes only. They were eyes that at all times seemed to be full of expression. Some eyes are made like that, and, when they are, it really matters very little whether their owner is looking at his grandmother or the woman he loves, the expression will be there in either case, and be very much of a muchness in both. Jack Denham's eyes had very often told of a love which did not exist; but they never, by any chance, had been able to disguise a love which their owner felt, and so it was that he betrayed himself to Dolly.

Now Dolly was annoyed with him for so betraying himself; annoyed, and yet not annoyed. She was a practical, rather strong-minded young lady in some ways, and she could not reconcile herself all at once to the fact that she had felt very much disgusted by Captain Denham's conduct for many months past, and until a week ago; and that now she was quickly forgetting his sins under the influence of his presence.

He was not the man she wished to love, she had told herself contemptuously, while thinking it over in his absence. She did not admire him, she admired quite a different kind of man; she had made a great mistake in her girlhood, and had shown a sad lack of taste.

Perhaps so, but she had not seen Jack Denham for five years, when she said all that to herself, and whatever may be said to the contrary, it is rare indeed when absence makes the heart grow fonder. She had forgotten what love was like, and she had forgotten that this same Jack Denham had it in his power, by a little word or look, to make her pulses thrill and throb, and her heart beat quicker. She had forgotten that she did admire him, faults and all, and that, if he was not quite perfect, even in her sight, she loved him as she had never loved, and could never love, any other man. She had forgotten that one little spark of that same love was worth all the prosaic common sense and platonic admiration ever created,

and that it cannot only cover a multitude of sins, but that it, and it alone, can lay the foundation for the nearest approach to happiness this world can give. She had forgotten it all but to relearn it during the first hour she spent in the society of the only man she had ever loved.

And, somehow or other, under the influence of this relearnt knowledge, Dolly Vernon seemed to lay aside the five years which had intervened since last she had seen Jack Denham, and with them the matronly, self-possessed woman-of-the-world manner she had acquired during those years. Her usual quiet presence of mind seemed to have forsaken her, and, much to her annoyance, she found herself alternately either blushing or behaving like a schoolgirl.

So she hurried away to put on her hat, and presently returned ready to accompany him to the stables.

The stables at Wyndeane had always been noted for their excellence, and, during the Squire's sojourn there, they had been added to and improved, until they were really the most perfect and model ones to be seen in the county.

Captain Denham had already paid a visit to them, and inspected the horses he intended to ride that day; so, as they walked down the carriage drive side by side, he found a simple and acceptable fund of conversation at his disposal, in the alterations made there since last he had seen them.

Dolly's horses had a stable to themselves; six model boxes under one roof, and in them six about as well-made, well-bred and perfect hunters as could be found in the United Kingdom.

Old 'Topper' and 'Viking' were old friends of Captain Denham's; and Dolly, as she stood by the former's side, remembered that day, now long ago, when she had ridden that long ride home in George Ventnor's company, and welcomed Jack Denham at the end of it as her father's best friend and her own lover; remembered how happy she had felt in the prospect of seeing him, how happy she had been when he had told her how he loved her, and asked her to wait until he could ask her to be his wife, and, woman-like, half forgot

the pain and sorrow which had intervened, and the selfishness and badness of his behaviour.

How handsome and gentlemanly he looked as he stood there, talking in his usual, genial, pleasant way to Dunston, and how evident it was that Dunston thoroughly admired and liked him, by the broad grin upon his face and the affability of his remarks.

How much better his clothes and boots seemed to fit him than other men's did; how well turned out and sportsman-like he looked; and how different and superior to any of the members of the Muddleton.

When Dolly arrived at this point, she roused herself indignantly from her reverie. Nonsense, she said to herself, did any man, not being a Muddletonite, ever look half so well as a Muddletonite?

Yes, she reluctantly granted a moment later, with a little flush; yes, the man who stood beside her, looking so tenderly down at her, looked not only as well, but twice as well as the best man amongst them.

'And this?' asked Captain Denham, as they passed on to the next box, 'a good-looking one and no mistake, and looks like going. Where did you get him?'

The reaction this question brought with it drove away every trace of the blush which Captain Denham's glance had brought into her cheeks, and, for a second, she hesitated before she answered.

'That's the poor Captain's 'orse, sir,' explained Dunston, in a subdued tone, which he evidently considered as being fitting for the occasion. As he spoke, he entered the box, and was crossing it, with a view to stripping the animal in question, when his young mistress peremptorily stopped him.

'Never mind, Dunston!' she exclaimed quite sharply, 'Captain Denham must look at the rest of the horses some other time. I think it is time we were thinking of starting,' she added, turning to the gentleman in question, and then, without another word, she turned and sauntered out of the stable.

Captain Denham naturally felt rather astonished by this behaviour on her part, it being the more strange, coming, as it did, from a particularly pleasant and well-

mannered woman. Dunston, who was an old and rather privileged servant, also thought her manner strange, and noted the puzzled expression which, for a moment or two, rested upon Captain Denham's face.

Miss Vernon thinks a lot of this 'orse, sir,' he explained, in a low voice; 'she felt the Captain's death h'awful, she did; and does not seem to get over it nohow.'

And with this explanation ringing in his ears, Captain Denham very slowly proceeded to follow Dolly, while Dunston went off to Viking's box, to hurry on the under-strapper who was putting on his bridle.

'She felt the Captain's death, h'awful.' Those words, ringing in Jack Denham's ears, brought an anxious, very troubled expression on his handsome face. Yes; of course, it must be so; it was probable that it was so! She had loved the man; she had been engaged to him; and she had just given very good proof of how keenly she still felt his death, and how the mere sight of his favourite horse, or sound of his name, upset her and pained her.

However, she showed no further sign of this, and greeted him with a cheerful remark, and her own most bewitching smile, when he joined her in the stable-yard; letting him swing her up into her saddle a minute later, and laughing quite gaily as she reminded him that he always used to do his best to send her right over the saddle instead of into it, and that once, long ago, he had all but succeeded in doing so.

She was very charming as they jogged along to the meet, and she rode nearly all the three miles there beside him; her father riding behind with George, who had chanced to join them just outside the park gates.

Charming, yes, certainly; but the schoolgirl blush which had, an hour or so ago, rendered her so indignant, and been noted by, and given infinite satisfaction to, Captain Denham, was conspicuous by its absence, and no longer flickered over her cheeks. Dolly had since then been sharply reminded that five long years had passed since last she had seen him, and that now she was no longer a child. She was a woman; a woman Captain Dasher had loved and admired; and, since he had thought

so highly of her, and honoured her so greatly, she must act and behave in a manner that would justify his opinion of her, and bring credit to his memory and judgment.

The remembrance of Captain Dasher had sobered the M. F. H.'s Daughter just when she was beginning to feel the influence of her lover's presence; and it had damped her reborn love for him, and acted, for the time being, as a check to its course.

Captain Denham was no fool, especially in a matter of this kind; and, although he hardly arrived at quite the exact state of her mind, he did not fall very far short of doing so. He had, of course, known Captain Dasher well; he had always looked upon him as a first-rate fellow, and he had fully realised how very much the best man he was amongst the members of the Muddleton hunt.

Jack Denham was a first-rate man across country himself, and deservedly was quite noted as being so, and many a time he and the late Captain Dasher had had a hard tussle of it for that first place, out of which neither of them were ever thoroughly happy. In those same struggles for that place of honour, Captain Denham was obliged to admit to himself he nearly invariably used to get the worst of it. He was a good man, and he knew it, as what good man across country does not; but it took a better man than himself to show the way to Harry Dasher, and better men than he had been were very few and far between.

That the late Captain Dasher had been the best man across country in Mudshire was an undisputable fact; but that Dolly Vernon had been in love with him had, until now, been a very doubtful question in Jack Denham's mind. In fact, the possibility of such a catastrophe as this had hardly crossed his mind.

That in old days she had loved him with all her heart he felt assured of; and he had felt so sure that she was not at all a likely woman to change her mind in a matter of this kind, that he had, until now, never thought it likely that she might have transferred her affections to a better and more worthy man. And now the conviction that this was the case had seized him, and every moment as it passed saw that conviction gaining strength.

In spite of the fact that he was by no means a perfect man, Jack Denham really loved her very truly; loved her more than he ever had loved any other woman, or ever would care for any other woman; and the thought that she had given all the affection of her warm, strong heart to another man was simply maddening to him. That he might have lost it, that he fully deserved to have lost it, had seemed more than probable; but that she should so far have forgotten her old love for him as to bestow her heart on another man, was a possibility which had seemed as remote as it now seemed unendurable.

Captain Denham never rode better than he did that day. As it happened, there was a burning scent, they found a good fox, and the Muddleton had a remarkably good run; and Captain Denham got, as usual, a good start, and made the most of it.

It did not strike him as being at all wonderful that he should have it all his own way. There was no Captain Dasher in the question now, and Jack Denham was well accustomed to leading the field in a real good thing; but, at the end of that run, the Muddletonites were unanimous in agreeing that he had gone extremely well, and that he rode as very few men could. Even George Ventnor, who, with good cause, resented his presence amongst them, was fain to admit that across country he was an uncommonly good man, whatever he might be in private life.

And George, in the kindness of his heart, seized the opportunity the occasion offered of saying something pleasant about him to Dolly. He discovered her standing by the covert side, rather apart from the rest, while her father and Belton were consulting together as to their next move.

'Uncommonly well Jack Denham went, did he not?' he remarked, as he approached her. 'He evidently means to show us how to go this year.'

'Oh, George, how can you talk like that?' was the half-angry answer.

'My dear Dolly, what is the matter?' he returned instantly, becoming both perplexed and troubled.

'Matter!' she replied, with a curious little catch in her

voice. 'How can you be so heartless, and forget things so soon?'

'Dear Dolly—' he began gently, more perplexed than ever.

'You might have known that I did not like to see him there,' she interrupted; and then for the first time looked up at him. There were unmistakable tears in her eyes.

The hounds moved away at that moment, and they slowly followed in their wake. Dolly had hastily brushed those two large tears away, and George, judging they were not intended for his sight, made no remark upon them. He never afterwards quite remembered what they talked about during the next five minutes; but, as he remarked to himself when he thought it over afterwards, women were incomprehensible beings, and the ins and outs of their minds were quite beyond him; but they possessed warm hearts, and not one amongst them had a warmer one than Dolly Vernon.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE RESULT OF AN ACCIDENT.

'Fortune, you say, flies from us; she but circles
Like the fleet sea-bird round the fowler's skiff—
Lost in the mist one moment, and the next
Brushing the white sail with her whiter wing.'

SCOTT.

THE fact of the matter was, that Dolly was very far from being in a happy or comfortable state of mind.

She knew that she still loved Jack Denham, but she only did so sorely against her will and judgment. In her own mind, she had formed her own opinion of him, and that opinion was certainly not a complimentary one.

Indeed, had she but known it, and George but suspected it, her apparent grief at seeing a stranger usurping poor Captain Dasher's place, although partly sincere, had its foundation in the fact that Dolly was a very determined young lady, and, having made up her mind that there was nothing to admire in Jack Denham, she

was much annoyed and upset to find that in this she was mistaken. Some people cannot bear to find themselves at fault in any matter, however small; some others will never grant that they have been so either to others or to themselves; and Dolly, although too sensible to belong to this latter class, was still foolish enough, good girl as she was, to belong to the former, and it was grief and pain to her when she felt obliged to own to herself that her judgment had been wrong.

She had, for some years past, pictured Jack Denham to herself as a poor, weak, faulty creature, whom she had had the misfortune to love, and whom she had honoured in doing so very greatly beyond his due. When she had discovered that she still loved him, she had crushed down all the natural joy and pleasure which his society gave her, and had forced herself to treat him in a half-patronising, half-condescending manner; and Jack, very humbly, had accepted this treatment, understanding from it that he had sinned unpardonably in her sight, and that, although she had very kindly forgiven him his sins, nothing in the world could ever place him on an equality with her again, or make her forget how greatly he had erred.

He knew he deserved this at her hands—this and more than this; and he felt very grateful for all the kindness she and her father had shown him; but, to a man who had always been extremely popular and made much of by his fellow-creatures, there was a sting in her manner which cut deeper than she ever knew or suspected. It was just like being told to stand on the bottom rung of the ladder, when you were used to being at the top, and, however certain you might be in your own mind that the bottom of it was your proper place, you could hardly fail to feel hurt at finding yourself there.

Jack was quite unconscious of the change which took place in Dolly's mind at the end of that run in which he so distinguished himself. To him, as to George, the workings of a woman's mind were a profound mystery. But that evening he was very conscious of a curious change in her manner.

She had suddenly become almost shy; she had ceased

to be condescending, and she seemed to be years younger than she had been that morning. By the evening, too, all vexation at finding herself wrong had vanished out of Dolly's mind, and, like a sensible woman, she had already begun to feel thankful that Jack, after all, was very far from being as black a sheep as she had painted him, and that there was certainly much to admire as well as much to condemn in him.

She could not but grant that the man who rode as he had ridden, looked as he had looked upon a horse, and been greeted by all the old members of the hunt as an old friend and kindred spirit, and who had been at his very best, laughing and jesting amongst them all—just a little more polished in his manner, and certainly more than just a little better dressed than any man amongst them—was quite a different being to the Captain John Denham she had been picturing to herself for the last few years. She was very quiet and subdued in her manner that evening; and in the new, shy, strange mood which had come over her, no longer found herself able to play successfully the part of the thorough woman of the world, which yesterday she had mastered and displayed to perfection. No; instead of making a point of talking chiefly to Jack Denham, she avoided doing so in a rather marked and girlish manner, addressing her remarks nearly exclusively to George, who happened to be dining at Wyndeane.

Had a woman been present, she would have understood in a few minutes how things were with Dolly, and how she was slipping back again to the time when she had loved and honoured Jack Denham beyond all other men, and when in his presence she had felt nervous, shy, happy, and troubled all at the same time. But to the three men who bore her company that evening, her conduct was a complete puzzle. They all three misunderstood it; and each of them did so in quite a different way.

The Squire was delighted to notice how indifferent her manner was to her old lover, and how greatly she evidently appreciated George.

George was extremely puzzled, and was fast becoming firm in the beliet that she had really cared for poor Harry Dasher.

And as to Jack, he was beginning to wish that he had never met her again, and that his visit to Wyndeane was at an end. It was simply torture to him to feel how greatly she despised and disliked him, and how unwelcome his presence evidently was, to feel that he had lost for ever the esteem and respect of the only human being whose opinion he really valued or cared for. Her indifference cut him to the quick; her coldness maddened him; and every gracious word or smile that she bestowed upon her cousin added to the tumult which was raging within his breast. He was rather prone to be humble-minded, and, unlike most good-looking people, he quite overlooked the fact that he was infinitely better looking than the generality of mankind, and that nature had bestowed upon him an unusually handsome face and well-proportioned figure, and it never struck him that, by right of these, he would have been justified in considering himself a rather favoured and privileged person; not that looks have any right to weigh in the balance at all; of course, we know all that; only somehow they do, and, granted a certain amount of wits, it is comparatively easy for a really good-looking man or woman to get on fairly well in life.

No, in some ways Jack Denham was far from being a bad man; and, unable as he was to forgive himself for his past fault, it struck him as only natural that Dolly would not be in the least likely to be able to forgive it either; and, overlooking the fact that some women bestow their hearts but once in a lifetime, it never crossed his mind that the mere fact that he had ridden straight in a good run, and looked very handsome and well turned out amongst a lot of rather rusticated country squires, could possibly have rekindled a fire which had been smouldering ever since the previous day, and the ashes of which a certain young lady's head had in vain been trying to rake out of her heart ever since last they two had met.

Certainly all this never struck him, and so hardly did he take her coldness, knowing how well he merited it, that he made up his mind that night to give up all idea of stabling his horses in Muddleton that winter, and to take himself off at the earliest possible moment to the shires.

But 'man proposes,' etc., and the next day an event occurred which completely changed the current of Jack Denham's ideas, and, with them, the course of his future actions.

The next day, for the first time in her life, the M. F. H.'s Daughter had an extremely nasty accident in the hunting field, and the result of it was disastrous in more ways than one.

She broke her arm in two places, and became engaged to be married to the very last man in the world her father would have chosen for her had he had his will.

She was riding old Topper, who, for some years past, had been studying the subject of how little exertion on his part would land him in safety over his fences, and between whom and Dolly there had been reigning a constant difference of opinion on this very point, it taking all her knowledge to keep him in mind of the fact that the extreme nicety of his style was displeasing to her, and that, on the whole, she preferred an inch to a quarter of one to spare over a stiff bit of timber or staken-bound hedge.

It was over a stiff post and rails that he gave her her fall; and a remarkably unpleasant fall it was. He knee'd them, and turned a somersault over them and on to Dolly. It was by no means the first time that he had come to grief in the very same way, but, so far, Dolly had always fallen clear of him, for she had a knack of falling well—an accomplishment not to be despised. But on this occasion, as if to make up for all the times she had escaped out of an awkward predicament scot-free, she fell about as awkwardly as she well could have done without being killed upon the spot.

And it so happened that, at the time of her accident, none of Dolly's friends were near her, for she had got a bad start in the run which was then in full swing, and her father and the rest were many fields ahead of her in consequence.

Some farmers, and a gentleman Dolly did not know, witnessed her fall, and bore her half-unconscious form to a cottage a couple of fields from the spot where she fell.

Once there, she fully—far too fully for her comfort—regained her wits, and found herself upon a remarkably uncomfortable horse-hair sofa, with a dull, terrible ache all over her right arm, which made her feel sick and faint.

The farmers had withrawn—the gentleman had ridden off to the nearest town in search of a doctor, and a good-tempered, rather stupid-looking woman alone bore her company.

'I have broken my arm,' Dolly remarked quietly to her, after a few minutes of perfect consciousness and physical agony.

'Eh, dear, Miss, but I hope not!' was the hasty reply, given in a nervous, flustered manner.

'But I have,' asserted the girl quietly. 'There can be no doubt about it. Will you get a pair of scissors, please? The sharpest you have.'

The woman hurried away, and presently returned; her sharpest pair of scissors might have taken a prize at a show for blunt ones, as poor Dolly very shortly discovered. Very quietly she asked Mrs Thomas, as she discovered her humble friend was called, to cut open her sleeve from wrist to shoulder, and in spite of Mrs Thomas's regrets over the habit she admired (and would have admired still more had she known the price which had been paid for it), and the almost unbearable pain the operation gave her, she insisted upon this request of hers being carried out.

Bad as the pain had been, Dolly was not quite prepared for the sight which met her gaze as soon as this was accomplished; and, in her usual practical manner, she felt very glad that she had not known how horridly her arm was injured when she had been having her sleeve hacked off by those blunt scissors, and Mrs Thomas's clumsy fingers.

It was a bad compound fracture; and the sight of it, almost as much as the pain, unnerved and upset our heroine.

No doctor came; a whole, seemingly interminable, hour passed; and Dolly still lay upon that horse-hair sofa, her arm laid out on a cushion beside her, and the agony she was suffering in it every moment growing more unendurable and hard to bear.

Not one word of complaint did she make. At first, indeed, she tried to keep up a disjointed conversation with Mrs Thomas; her habitual and natural courtesy to those beneath her socially making the necessity for doing so appear imperative to her. But, by-and-by, as time went on, the agony she was undergoing mastered her power of speech, and, after that, she lay quite silently, utterly no word of either impatience or complaint.

And then, suddenly, the outer-door opened, a man's footstep sounded in the kitchen, and some one wrapped upon a table with a stick.

The footsteps were unquestionably a soldier's; the stick, the stock of a hunting crop; and, with a little cry, Dolly exclaimed, 'Jack!' and Mrs Thomas opened the door of the little room in which she lay, and disclosed the tall, soldierly, red-coated figure of Captain Denham upon the other side of it.

'Oh, Jack!' moaned Dolly again, in the same pitiful —on the point of breaking down—way; and, as she spoke, she held out her left hand towards him.

In another second he was kneeling beside her; and Mrs Thomas, with a discretion and promptitude that no one would have given her the credit of possessing, had closed the door upon them, and left them alone together.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A TALK IN THE LILY GARDEN.

'Turn, Fortune, turn thy wheel with smile or frown;
With that wild wheel we go not up or down;
Our hoard is little, but our hearts are great.
Smile and we smile, the lords of many lands;
Frown and we smile, the lords of our own hands;
For man is man, and master of his fate.'

TENNYSON.

AND so it was that, in a moment, the barrier of reserve between these two, which it had taken five years to construct, in what appeared to be a satisfactory manner, was broken down.

After the quarter of an hour they spent together in that

cottage parlour, waiting for the doctor, there was no use in their attempting to keep up a feud any longer. That quarter of an hour settled the course of their future lives, for, before either the doctor or the Squire arrived upon the scene, Dolly, rendered weak and childish by pain and the need of sympathy, had confessed to Jack Denham's willing ears that he was the only man she had ever loved, or ever would love.

The Squire knew what had happened the moment he saw Dolly's face, but, in the confusion and anxiety of the moment, hardly found time to feel disturbed by his discovery. As a matter of fact, disturbing as it assuredly was, it was no new thing to him, for, since the first evening of Jack's stay at Wyndeane, he had been fully aware of the state of his daughter's mind.

And so it was that Dolly broke her arm and became engaged to be married. And, the following summer, there was a very gay pink wedding at the little church in the village, which lay about half-a-mile from the Wyndeane park gates. It was a very gay wedding indeed, and, to do him justice, the bridegroom conducted himself extremely well upon that most trying occasion—that is to say, he answered all the responses in church in a distinct tone, as if he meant them, and made a remarkably short speech afterwards at breakfast, which, short as it was, was still so much to the point that it impressed all who heard it favourably. Then he was in extremely high spirits throughout the day, and he displayed an amount of *savoir faire* and extreme consideration for Dolly, which went far towards reconciling the Squire to the marriage.

Afterwards, everyone agreed that never before had such a remarkably good-looking couple been joined together in holy matrimony in that little village church, and in this they were right. On another point, however, public opinion was quite wrong. It remarked that Lord Ventnor, after all, only cared in a purely platonic way about the bride, and that it had made a great mistake in ever thinking otherwise. He had been the life and soul of the party, and it was to him that everyone turned for information or advice. It was Lord Ventnor who made all the amusing little remarks; it was Lord Ventnor

who kept everything going gaily as the marriage-bells; but, when all was said and done, it was a feverish, unnatural mirth which possessed poor George on that, to him, never-to-be-forgotten day, and, if a man's heart ever did go near to breaking, his was nearly broken, when everything was over, the necessity for keeping up appearances had passed, and Dolly had departed out of his life and her own old, girlish life for ever. And yet Dolly had not really gone away, for it had been arranged that, for the present at any rate, she and her husband were to live with the Squire.

When Captain and Mrs Denham returned to Wyndeane after a rather short honeymoon, everything, apparently, went on again very much in its old groove. It was only George who felt how great the difference was, and in whose breast there began that fierce battle against one's self which Dolly, not so very long ago, had been fighting and struggling with in vain—that terrible battle against a love which both the laws of God and man alike forbade and called a sin. His mother and little Fanny Fairsmore alone understood what that battle was to George, or how much it cost him; and even those two loving, sympathetic women little knew how terrible and bitter that struggle was to his straightforward, honourable nature, or how often he wished that, without causing any comment to be made about his doing so, he could go away and turn his back upon his old familiar life for ever.

But George knew that he could not do. He was a man of mark, his devotion to his cousin in old days had been much remarked upon, and to leave the castle just after her marriage would certainly give rise to considerable gossip. And George loved her far too dearly not to consider her first in all things; far too dearly to wish to cause one word of gossip to be connected with her name. She was married now, and no hint of any man's attachment to her, save her husband's, must get whispered about, either in Mudshire or out of it.

So George remained quietly at Ventnor Castle, and suffered torments which Dolly little dreamt of.

As to Dolly, her life at Wyndeane went on very much as usual, only she was supremely happy and well-con-

tented with her lot, so much so, in fact, that before very long the Squire began to realise that, however unsatisfactory Captain Denham might have been as a lover, he was proving himself remarkably devoted and desirable as a husband.

George also noticed this, and, during those first dreary months after Dolly's return to Mudshire as a bride, this was his one consolation.

If only it would last!

After a time, a conviction came to George that it would last, and, as this conviction deepened into a certainty, he grew more resigned, and finally began to settle down to his old ways again, and to cease to ask his heart and trouble his mind with questions as to just how much he loved another man's wife. That love, which had grown up with him, was part of himself, and could not be easily uprooted. So he told himself, and so gave up his vain endeavours to conquer it, and contented himself by keeping it outwardly in check, and under excellent control.

And Mrs Coningham, with a mother's intuition, having understood the struggle, also understood the lethargy which followed it, and the danger and undesirability of that lethargic state.

Unless something could be done to rouse him, she knew quite well he would now slip into that wholly unsatisfactory but common groove, that sentimental love for another man's wife which is not only an unnatural upside down state of affairs, but ruins so many a man's life and prospects.

In George's case there was very little real harm in it, save the harm it did himself; but, to Mrs Coningham this was a very serious harm, and one not to be submitted to without a struggle.

George must marry; and since Dolly could not marry him, well, Mrs Coningham knew another very desirable woman who both could and would. She determined to have a talk with George upon the subject, and, although the prospect of that talk was far from pleasing to her, and she felt a little afraid of how he might take it, she took the first opportunity which seemed propitious to enter upon the subject which so greatly filled her thoughts.

And the result was quite different to her expectations, and gave her very great satisfaction.

She need not have feared how George would take her suggestions, for no one could possibly have proved more sensible and open to reason than he did.

It was after dinner one evening, when they were alone together in the garden, that Mrs Coningham laid her hand on her son's arm, and drew him towards the path between the borders where the famous lilies grew.

No lilies ever flourished anywhere as did those in the garden at Ventnor, at least so everyone said, and they were in full bloom as Mrs Coningham and her son slowly passed along, side by side, amongst them.

It was not until they reached the border of the lake, which lay at the end of that long lily-bordered path, that Mrs Coningham spoke.

The heavy perfume of the lilies filled the still summer air, and the water at their feet lay cool and motionless in the already deepening twilight.

'George,' she began gently. 'I think that you are growing selfish.'

'I am sorry to hear that, little mother,' he replied quietly, but evidently rather surprised by her remark. 'Not but that I am quite as selfish as my fellow-men, but because I would have wished you to continue to think me perfect.'

There was a slight inclination to jest in George's tone, affectionate and even respectful as it was; but in his mother's, when she answered him, all thought of jesting was very far away.

'I certainly wish to do so, my boy,' she returned gravely; 'but when I see you caring for nothing but your own personal grievances, my opinion of you naturally grows less.'

George turned just a little pale, as his mother noted, even in the twilight. He understood now that something was going to be said about his love for Dolly. He did not like it, but he merely bowed his head, and waited patiently and gravely for her to continue speaking.

Mrs Coningham paused; and, when she next spoke, evidently said something quite different to what she had at first intended.

'You know, my boy, you really must marry,' she said bluntly. 'It is your duty to marry. You are the last of the family. There can be no question about it—it is your duty to marry.'

'I quite see that, mother,' he replied quietly, after a few moments' pause. 'It is my intention to do so, and it shall be done, if you will give me a little time.'

Mrs Coningham had never hoped for such a ready surrender as this, but, like a worldly-wise little lady, she did not show her surprise, and instantly objected to the only part of his surrender which any one could possibly have found any fault with.

'Why do you want time?' she asked quietly.

'You know why,' he replied, hurt by her question, and seeming lack of sympathy.

Mrs Coningham nodded.

'Yes, dear, I know why. It is as I said—you are growing selfish.'

'I think you are being rather hard upon me, mother,' he returned gently.

'I beg your pardon, George. If I am, the wish to be so is certainly far away from me; but I cannot help noticing how far more important your own trouble seems to you than the trouble of others—of another.'

'What do you mean?' he demanded, in puzzled accents.

'You must know quite well, George, how ill and troubled a certain lady has been looking lately, and how deeply she feels the pain which she believes you are enduring,' replied his mother very quietly.

'Dolly?' exclaimed George, flushing scarlet.

'No!' she replied, almost curtly. 'Not Dolly! There are other women in the world as well as Dolly.'

For several seconds George was silent. Then, in a voice which shook a little with mingled surprise and agitation, he said slowly,—

'I must ask you to explain yourself, mother. I do not understand what you mean to imply, or wish me to do.'

'Do you really mean to say that you have no idea as to whom I am referring to, or what I mean?' asked Mrs Coningham, glancing up at him. 'No idea that one woman, at any rate, appreciates you at your true worth?'

'Many people may do that,' he replied bitterly, 'and not think much of me. I suppose I shall find a wife when I look for one. Next year, in town, I may find more than one ready to marry me, no doubt!'

'Why are you allowing your trouble to master you and make you so egotistical and disagreeable, my boy?' returned his mother gently. 'You might surely do better than look for a worldly young lady. If I were you, I should only marry a woman who loved me for myself.'

'And that, mother, is just what I shall never do,' he replied gravely. 'When I marry I will do so in a straightforward fashion, or not at all. I shall marry because it is necessary that I should do so; and the woman I marry shall marry me because she wishes to be the Countess of Ventnor. That will be a fair bargain, mother; but as to marrying some young girl who would be miserable unless she was all in all to me—never! you need not ask it!'

'I am far from either asking it or wishing it, George,' was the quiet answer. 'But has it never struck you that there is a woman to whom you are all in all, as you call it, and who would marry you to-morrow, make you an excellent wife, and be happy ever afterwards?'

'No,' he replied; 'that certainly never struck me. Who is it, mother? Tell me, and let me think it over. I could not marry to-morrow, possibly, nor to-morrow week even; but if I can, I will marry to please you, since I cannot do so to please myself.'

'What do you say to Fanny Fairsmore?' inquired Mrs Coningham, glancing not at him, but at the still water at her feet.

George started preceptibly. Slowly, very slowly this time, a little tinge of crimson mounted into and spread over his face.

'I have never thought about it,' he replied at last; 'nor, I am sure, has she.'

'I have always said that you were a dear, but stupid boy,' replied Mrs Coningham, her eyes sparkling with inward delight and satisfaction; 'but I never thoroughly realised how far a man's stupidity could carry him until now.'

THE END.

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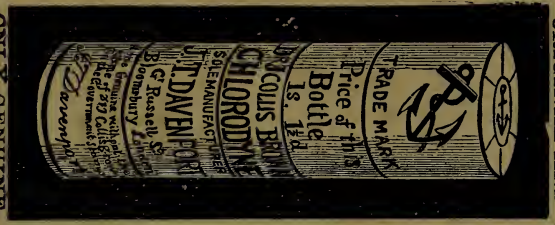
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